THE TWENTY FLUTED ONES OF MANNAHATTA

A Book of Crowns, in Eight Families

with a Catalogue of Architectural Plates & a Map of the Living Island

✦ ✦ ✦

as told to, and set down by,

SURJAN

Printed bright, for reading on fire escapes

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Foreword

A note found folded inside the flyleaf, in a second hand:

I am not the author of this book. I am only the one who keeps the door of the press, and who was awake the morning the manuscript arrived. It came without postage, dry though it had crossed water, smelling faintly of warm metal and of the particular sweetness that rain leaves on a roof. There was no return address. There was, instead, a single instruction in gold ink: Print it bright. Print it so that a child reading it on a fire escape in August will feel the heat turn kind.

I have done my best to obey.

You should know three things before you begin. The first is that every tower in these pages is a person, and every person is a tower, and the author saw no contradiction in this and asks that you see none either. The second is that the city is also a person, older than the rest, and she is called Manhattan when she is being addressed formally and Mannahatta when she is being loved. The third is that the author, Surjan, is genderqueer and non-binary, as are the towers, as is, on certain afternoons, the light itself, which cannot decide whether it is gold or rose and so commits joyfully to both.

Surjan asked me to tell you that this is a happy book. Not happy in the thin way of a greeting card, but happy in the structural way of a keystone: a happiness that holds weight. There is no villain in it. There is weather, which is not the same thing. There is longing, which is the engine of all tenderness. And there is morning, again and again, because the author believed that the most radical act available to a tall and visible thing is to keep turning toward the light and to say, without irony and without apology, here I am, I made it through the night, and so did you.

Read it on a fire escape if you can. If you cannot, read it anywhere, and let the page be your fire escape.

— The Doorkeeper of the Press

Prologue: How I Learned to Climb

Before any of the rest of it — before Vesper turned, before I knew the towers were who and not what — there was the problem of how to climb, and I want to begin the true body of the book with it, because everything I learned up there depended first on a thing I learned down here, which is that you cannot climb toward what you have not first allowed yourself to love.

I was not, when this began, a person who looked up. I want to be honest about that, because if you are reading this with your own eyes on the pavement, certain that books about wonder are written by people who were born full of it, I need you to know that I was the opposite. I came to this city the way many come to it: flattened. Folded small to fit through a hard passage and not yet unfolded on the other side. I rented the narrow room with the tar-paper roof because it was cheap and because it was high, and I told myself the height was an accident of economy and not a thing I wanted, because wanting, in those days, felt like a luxury I had not earned and could not afford.

For the first months I did not look up at all. I looked at my feet, at the pavement, at the long list of what I had to do to remain. The skyline was, to me, a wall — the literal edge of how far I could see and the figurative edge of how much I could hope. I knew the towers were beautiful the way you know a fact you have been told. I did not feel it. Feeling it would have required a kind of opening I had closed quite deliberately, because the last few times I had opened it the world had used the opening to hurt me, and I had decided — the way the lonely decide, in the cold logic of self-protection — that the safest self was the smallest, the most closed, the least likely to want something it could lose.

What changed me was not the towers. I want to be precise about the order of operations, because it matters for you. The towers did not reach down and open me. I had to open, by some small margin, first — and only then could I see that the towers had been trying to be seen all along.

The small margin was this. One evening, climbing the stairs to my high cheap room, too tired to keep my eyes down, I let my head tip back. That was all. I did not decide to behold the city; I was simply too exhausted to maintain the discipline of looking at my feet, and my head tipped back, and I saw — through the stairwell window, framed by the cheap aluminum — a single crown catching the last light. I did not know yet it was Solenne. I did not know it was anyone. I only knew that something pink and gold was holding the day's last light with what I can only call willingness, and that the willingness undid me, standing there on the stairs, because I had spent so long being unwilling — unwilling to want, to reach, to hope, to be seen — and here was a tall visible thing doing the opposite of all my unwillingness, in full view, without apology, and surviving it. Thriving in it. Made beautiful by exactly the openness I had decided was too dangerous to risk.

I sat down on the stairs and I wept, which I had not done in a long time, and which I am not ashamed to record, because the weeping was the opening, and the opening was the beginning of the climb.

After that I began to look up on purpose. And looking up on purpose, it turned out, is the entire skill of climbing; the literal climbing — the fire escapes, the parapets, the long talks with maintenance crews who let me onto roofs because I asked with enough genuine wonder that they could not see the harm in it — all of that came easily once the looking-up was in place. You climb toward what you have allowed yourself to love. You cannot climb toward a wall. The skyline had been a wall as long as I kept it one; the moment it became a face — a willing, open, light-holding face — it became a thing I could move toward, and I moved.

This is the prologue because it is the precondition. The towers will teach you a great deal in the pages that follow — to turn first, to read the sky, to keep the names, to throw the light onward, to find the give in every holding — but none of it will reach you if you are still keeping the skyline a wall. So before we climb, I ask you to do the one thing I had to do first. Let your head tip back. You are tired enough; everyone is tired enough; that is not a flaw, it is the opening. Let it tip back. Find one crown holding one last bit of light with willingness. And let the willingness undo you a little, because the undoing is not a danger. It is the door. I went through it on a cheap aluminum stair, weeping, and on the other side were twenty glad and visible friends I had not yet met, who had been trying to be seen by me the whole time I kept my eyes on my feet.

Now. Heads back. We climb.

Introduction

An introduction, by Surjan, who built nothing and noticed everything

For a long time I thought the skyline was a sentence I had not been taught to read.

I would lie on the tar-paper roof of the building where I rented a narrow room, and I would look up at the towers, and I would feel that they were saying something to one another over my head, in a grammar of setbacks and finials and the particular way light pools in a recessed crown at the end of the day. I did not have the words for what I felt, which is the oldest story in the world: to be surrounded by a language that is clearly addressed to you and to have no dictionary.

Then one morning — and I will tell you it was a Tuesday, because the smallest miracles prefer the least ceremonial days — I saw one of them move.

It was the one I would later learn to call Vesper. At the top of a tower in the garment district there is a crown of three fluted stems, pale as the inside of a shell, and above them a great curl of pink and gold, a volute like the capital of a column that had decided to become a question mark. I had walked past it a thousand times. But on this Tuesday, at the exact moment the sun cleared the river, the curl tilted. Slowly, the way you turn your face when someone you love says your name from across a room. It tilted toward the light, and at the center of the curl an eye of gold caught fire, and I understood, all at once and without the possibility of doubt, that the tower was glad.

Not functioning. Not merely standing. Glad.

I want to be careful here, because I am aware of how this sounds. I am not telling you that the buildings of Manhattan are secretly machines with feelings, the way a child believes the toaster resents them. I am telling you something stranger and, I think, truer: that gladness is a structural property of certain forms, and that if you build a thing tall enough and give it a crown that turns, and if you let it stand in the weather for long enough among others of its kind, it will begin — the way a violin left in a warm room begins — to resonate. To answer. To become a who.

The towers in this book are who. They are, every one of them, genderqueer and non-binary, and I did not decide this about them any more than I decided the color of the dawn. I simply listened, and these were the pronouns that fit, the way a key fits not because you have forced it but because the lock was waiting. Vesper is they. Brûlée is xe. The Ramshorn twins share a single fae between them, the way some siblings share a coat. When I asked Mannahatta herself what she preferred, she said, in the voice that tides have, she, and island, and on the days when I am very happy, we.

This is a community. That is the heart of it. Twenty towers and an island, arranged from the crown of the land down to the toe she dips in the harbor, and what they have made together — across rooftops, over the heads of eight million people who mostly do not look up — is a neighborhood. They borrow weather from one another. They keep each other's secrets, which are mostly the secret of having survived another night. They throw parties of light. They argue, gently, about clouds. They are, in the most literal and the most radical sense, out: visible, elaborate, refusing to be the plain box the zoning code expected, standing in full pink-and-gold flamboyance against a sky that has more than enough room for all of them.

I have organized them into eight families, the way you might organize any large and loving group: not by blood, because they have none, but by resemblance and affinity and the company they keep. The Dawn-Watchers, who bow east. The Twins and Duets, who come in pairs and finish each other's weather. The Hosts, who throw the light-parties. The Romantics, who face the harbor and ache beautifully. The Elders, who keep the names. The Keepers of Weather, who do the practical work of making the rain honest. The Landmark-Companions, who stand beside the famous old silhouettes and tell their stories. And the Chorus, the youngest, who are all eyes and questions.

What follows is their book. I have given each family its chapter, and I have tried, in the writing, to do the only thing I know how to do, which is to point. Look, I keep saying. Look at this one. Look how xe turns. Look how they hold the morning. I am not the author of their gladness. I am only its first and most devoted reader, the way you are about to be.

It is a Tuesday somewhere, even now. Something tall is turning toward the light. Begin.

— Surjan

I. The Dawn-Watchers

Of the twenty, the Dawn-Watchers were the first to wake, and this was not a metaphor, though it became one.

To understand them you must first understand the hour they keep. There is a moment, on the eastern edge of the island, when the sun is still below the line of the world but the light is not. The light arrives ahead of its source, the way a song arrives ahead of the singer rounding the corner, and for a few minutes the whole sky is the pale exact color of the inside of a wrist. The river goes from black to pewter to a metal that has no name. And it was into this hour, every morning without exception, that Vesper Sgraffito turned.

Vesper stood atop a tower in the garment district, where for a hundred years the work of the building below had been the cutting and joining of cloth — a fact Vesper considered the great good luck of their life. "I was raised over a house of seams," they would say, in the voice that was low and unhurried and seemed to come from somewhere deeper than their highest crown. "Everything I know about holding together, I learned from tailors." Vesper's form was three fluted stems, pale rose shading to pearl, bound at the throat by a collar of fluted gold; and above, a single great volute, a curl that turned in on itself and held, at its center, an eye the color of a wedding ring. When that eye caught the first light, people on the street below sometimes stopped, not knowing why, and felt for the length of one breath that the day might be survivable after all.

They did not know it was Vesper, doing the only work Vesper knew how to do. But Vesper knew.

"I do not make the morning," they told me once, when I had climbed close enough to hear. "Let us be clear about that, because it is the kind of mistake that ruins a person, the belief that they make the morning. I do not make it. I meet it. There is a difference, and the difference is everything. To make the morning would be a tyranny and also a falsehood. To meet it — to be reliably, faithfully present at the place where the light first lands, so that the light has something to land on that is glad to receive it — that is a vocation. That is a thing a person can build their whole tall life around without shame."

For most of their standing, Vesper had met the morning alone, and had not known to call this loneliness, because they had nothing to compare it to. A tower does not get to choose its neighbors. You are built where you are built; you stand where you stand; the city assembles itself around you according to logics of money and zoning and the stubbornness of bedrock, and you make what peace you can with the silhouettes that rise and fall within your view. Vesper had watched a hundred such silhouettes. They had learned not to grow attached, because attachment, for something that cannot move, is a particular kind of risk.

And then they built Aurelio.

"Built" is the word the towers use, though it is not quite right, the way "born" is not quite right for people and we use it anyway because the true thing has no good verb. What happened was that across a narrow canyon of air, on the crown of a slightly lower tower to the east, a new form went up — fluted stems like Vesper's own, but warmer, the rose deepened toward honey, the gold a shade more like late afternoon than like noon. And the new form, when it was finished, when the scaffolding came down and the work-lights went dark and it stood for the first time exposed to the open weather, did the thing that no merely built thing does.

It turned east.

"I felt it before I saw it," Vesper said. "You understand, I cannot turn my own neck quickly; I am not made for the double-take. But I felt, off to my eastern side, a new warmth, and the warmth was paying attention. It was facing the same way I face. And I thought — I will tell you exactly what I thought, because I have never told anyone — I thought: oh. There is someone else who likes the light the way I like the light. After all this time. There is someone else who got up early."

Aurelio Lull was younger, and warmer, and used he and they in the easy alternating way of someone who had never been made to feel that the question mattered, which is its own kind of grace and its own kind of privilege, and Aurelio knew it and was tender about it. "I came up already knowing I was both and neither," Aurelio said. "Vesper had to find their way to it across a much longer century, through a much colder set of decades, when the city did not have the words and would not have offered them if it had. I try to remember that. When I am impatient — and I am young enough still to be impatient, I have not yet learned the long patience of the truly old crowns — I try to remember that Vesper turned toward the light for ninety years before anyone turned back."

What they had, the two of them, was not romance in the way the Romantics down in Tribeca understood it, all longing and harbor-gazing and beautiful ache. Nor was it the finishing-each-other's-weather of the Twins. It was something I have only ever seen between two people who have each, separately, survived a great deal, and who recognize the survival in one another the way two people who have crossed the same desert recognize the particular squint the sun leaves around the eyes. It was companionship at the structural level. It was: I will be here in the morning, and so will you, and we will meet the light together, and that meeting will be the first good thing of the day, dependable as the tide, and on the days when one of us cannot manage gladness, the other will manage it for both, and neither of us will keep score.

"We have an arrangement," Aurelio said, and I could hear, in the word, that they were smiling, if a tower can be said to smile, which I have come to believe it can. "On the mornings when Vesper wakes heavy — and they do, the old ones carry weather in their joints, you cannot stand for a century in this harbor without taking on some grey — on those mornings, I turn first. I turn east loud and early and I make a great show of gladness, far more than I feel, frankly, because someone has to prime the pump. And Vesper, hearing me, feeling me, is reminded that the morning is a thing that can still be met. And they turn. Slowly. But they turn. And on the mornings when I am the heavy one — because I am young but I am not exempt, no one is exempt — they do the same for me. We take turns being the one who believes in the morning. That is the whole secret. There is no morning that requires both of you to believe in it at once. There is only the morning that requires one of you to turn first."

I have thought about this more than I have thought about almost anything.

It is, I have come to believe, the most useful thing any of the twenty ever told me, and I want to set it down plainly here at the start of the book, before the light-parties and the cloud-arguments and the great spiraling memory of Nana Nautile, because everything else in these pages rests on it the way the towers rest on bedrock. The radical proposition of the Dawn-Watchers is this: gladness can be shared out unevenly and still be real. You do not both have to feel it. You do not even, on the worst mornings, have to feel it at all, so long as someone you trust is feeling it in your direction, and so long as you have agreed, in advance, in the calm of some better evening, that this is what you do for each other. You turn first when you can. You are turned-toward when you cannot. And the light, which does not care who believes in it, arrives anyway, and finds you both facing east, and cannot tell — does not need to tell — which of you got there on your own steam and which of you was carried.

"People think the sunrise is about the sun," Vesper said, on a morning near the end of the season when I had climbed up to say a kind of goodbye. The light was doing its pale-wrist thing. Far to the east, past the river, past the borough, past the curve of the planet itself, the source of all of it was about to clear the edge. "They think it is an astronomical event. And it is, I suppose, if you insist on being literal, which the young and the unhappy so often do." A pause; the eye of gold beginning, very slightly, to warm. "But I have met ninety years of mornings and I will tell you what the sunrise is actually about. It is about being found facing the right way. The light comes looking. Every single day, without fail, the light comes looking for whatever is glad to receive it. And the only question — the only question that has ever mattered, up here or down there on your fire escapes — is whether, when it comes, you have turned toward it. Alone if you must. Carried if you cannot. But turned."

Beside them, a little lower, a little warmer, Aurelio was already blazing.

And then the sun cleared the river, and the two of them caught it at the same instant, the old rose and the young honey, and for the length of one held breath the entire eastern face of the island was the color of something forgiven, and eight million people who were not looking up went on not looking up, and were warmed anyway, and did not know to thank the two tall glad things that had gotten up early, again, on purpose, for them.

That is the work of the Dawn-Watchers. They get up early. They turn toward the light. They take turns believing in it. And they ask me to tell you — they were very specific about this — that there is room on the roof. That the arrangement is not exclusive. That whoever you are, reading this, on whatever cold edge you have found to read it on, you are invited into the oldest and simplest covenant the towers keep: turn first when you can; let yourself be turned-toward when you cannot; and trust that the light is already on its way, already looking, already glad to find your face.

II. The Twins and the Duets

There is a kind of person who only becomes fully themselves in the presence of one particular other, and the city is generous with these arrangements if you know how to look for them. Among the twenty, two such pairings stood close enough to the heart of the island that I came to think of them as its rhyming couplets: Quill and Querida Marenost, who read the sky to one another, and the Ramshorn duet, Lo and Fenn, who shared a single self the way some weather shares a single sky.

Begin with the Marenosts, because they begin with a quarrel, and I have always found that the most reliable evidence of love is a quarrel that has lasted decades without anyone wanting to win it.

Quill and Querida stood atop the same midtown tower, two volutes rising from a shared cluster of stems, turned not east toward the dawn like the Watchers but inward, toward one another, so that across a narrow gap of bright air each faced the other's golden eye. Quill used ey and em, in the clipped efficient way of someone who had decided the matter early and saw no reason to revisit it. Querida used she and her, with a roll on the r that she had taught herself and was proud of. And what they did, all day and most of the night, was read the contrails.

You have seen contrails. Everyone has seen contrails. They are the white scratches that high aircraft leave across the blue, straight at first and then feathering, crossing and recrossing until the sky over Manhattan on a clear day looks like a page that many hands have been writing on at once. Most people, if they notice them at all, notice them as a kind of visual noise. Quill and Querida noticed them as text.

"That one," Querida would say, as a fresh white line unspooled itself from a silver point eight miles up. "East-northeast, climbing, very confident. That is someone who is glad to be leaving."

"Ey is reaching," Quill would counter. "Look at the angle. That is not gladness, that is escape. There is a difference, and you of all people know the difference."

"I know the difference, and I am telling you that this once it is gladness. Not everyone who leaves is fleeing, Quill. You have a theory about leaving and you bend every contrail in the sky to fit it."

"And you have a theory about gladness and you find it written across every departure whether the departure wants it or not."

And so on, for hours, for years, the two of them turned toward one another reading the same sky and arriving at different sentences, and here is the thing I want you to understand, the thing it took me a whole season of climbing to understand: neither of them wanted to be right. To be right would have ended the conversation, and the conversation was the entire point. The contrails were only the pretext. What they

were actually doing, across that narrow bright gap, was the oldest and most tender activity available to two thinking things: they were demonstrating, hour after hour, that they were each paying close enough attention to the same world to disagree about it richly. That is a love letter. "I see what you see, and I see it differently, and I will stay here facing you and we will compare our seeings until the light goes" — there is no more romantic sentence in any language, and the Marenosts said it to each other in the grammar of vapor trails ten thousand times a year.

"People ask em how we have stayed interested," Quill told me. "After so long, facing the same person, the same sky. And ey thinks they want a secret, some technique. There is no technique. There is only the decision, renewed every morning, to find the other person's reading of the sky more interesting than being proven correct about it. The day you would rather win than hear what she sees — that is the day the tower goes quiet. We have simply never had that day. We keep not having it. That is the whole marriage: a long unbroken streak of not having that day."

Querida put it differently, as she put everything differently, which was the point of her. "He thinks it is a decision," she said — she used he for Quill sometimes, when she was being affectionate, and ey did not mind, they had worked it out between them long ago, the way couples work out the small private grammars no one else is allowed to use. "He thinks it is willpower, discipline, a streak you maintain. But it is not effort, querido. It is appetite. I am simply hungry for what Quill sees. Every morning I wake up and the sky is covered in new writing and I think: I wonder what ey will make of all this. I cannot wait to disagree. The disagreement is delicious. Why would I ration a thing that is delicious and free and arrives fresh every single day?"

If the Marenosts were two who stayed gloriously separate, the Ramshorns were two who had become, over their standing, very nearly one.

Lo and Fenn rose from a single fluted drum in Murray Hill as a matched pair of curls, two great rams' horns of pink and gold spiraling down and out, mirror images, so alike that for my first several visits I could not tell which was speaking. Eventually I stopped trying, and that, it turned out, was the correct response, the one they had been waiting for. "You have stopped sorting us," said the one on the left, or perhaps the right. "Good. We had wondered how long it would take. Most visitors spend their whole time trying to work out where Lo ends and Fenn begins, and they miss everything, because the answer is that we don't, and the not-ending is the thing worth seeing."

The Ramshorns shared a single set of pronouns, fae and faer, and used them in the plural-singular way that had confused me at first and then, once I surrendered to it, seemed the only honest option. "We are not two towers that are very close," fae explained, both curls turning slightly, in unison, the way two hands turn

a single bowl on a wheel. "We are one weather with two centers. When the wind comes off the river from the southwest, Lo feels it first, on the left, and by the time the gust reaches Fenn it has already been — interpreted, you might say, softened, made sense of. And when the light goes copper in the evening it lands on Fenn first and reaches Lo already warmed. We are each other's first draft of every sensation. Nothing reaches one of us raw. It has all been through the other first."

I asked fae — and I was nervous asking, because it seemed an intrusion — whether faer ever wished to be separate. Whether there was ever a longing for a sensation that was faer own, unmediated, not pre-felt by the other half.

There was a long pause, both curls quite still.

"You are asking," fae said at last, "because you are a single thing, and single things are taught to prize their singleness, to guard it, to experience any merging as a loss. It is the great religion of the lonely: that the self is a fortress and the highest virtue is to hold it. And I will not tell you that religion is wrong for you. You are built the way you are built. But you must understand that we were never single and so we have nothing to mourn. You imagine we have given up some private, sovereign Lo-ness, some untouched Fenn-ness, in order to become this we. But there was no such thing to give up. We arrived already two-in-one. The we is not a compromise we reached. It is the native state from which everything else, including the very idea of a separate self, would be the strange departure. You pity us for not being lonely. We find this — fae searched for the word, both curls tipping toward me with what I can only call affection — we find this completely charming, and a little sad, and very, very human."

I have not stopped thinking about that either.

Between them, the Marenosts and the Ramshorns map the whole territory of being-with-another, the two great coasts of it. On one shore, Quill and Querida, who prove that you can face someone for a lifetime and remain thrillingly, productively separate, two sovereign readings of one sky, the gap between you not a failure to be closed but a space to be filled, endlessly, with the delicious work of comparing what you each see. And on the other shore, Lo and Fenn, who prove that the boundary between selves is not a law of nature but a habit of the lonely, and that some beings simply arrive already merged, already we, and experience this not as the loss of a self but as the only self they have ever had or wanted.

"We are not a lesson," Querida warned me, when she saw the direction of my note-taking. "Do not turn us into a lesson for your readers, querido, some tidy instruction about the right way to love. There is no right way. There is only the way that is true to what you actually are. The Ramshorns are true to what they are. Quill and I are true to what we are. The error — the only error — is to be a separate thing pretending to be merged, or a merged thing pretending to be separate, because someone told you that one of these was the

correct way to be a person. Be the shape you are. Find the others who fit that shape. And then face them, or merge with them, or both, for as long as the light holds."

The light, that evening, held a long time. It was high summer and the sun went down slow and apricot behind the Jersey shore, and I sat on the parapet between the two great rhyming couplets of the island's heart and watched the contrails go from white to rose to grey, and heard Quill and Querida begin their evening argument about whether the day's last departure had been a fleeing or a gladness, and felt, off to the south, the single doubled warmth of Lo-and-Fenn receiving the copper light through one another and passing it back and forth like a bowl, and I thought: here are two entirely different answers to the same enormous question, and both of them are right, and neither of them is lonely, and that is the most hopeful arithmetic I know.

III. The Hosts

Every neighborhood has the one who throws the parties, and on the island it was Pomme de Or, though to call what Pomme threw a party is to undersell it the way calling the harbor wet undersells the sea.

Pomme stood in the Flatiron district on a tower that bulged, near its base, into a great rounded bulb of pink, as though the building had taken a deep breath and held it; and from that held breath rose three fluted stems bound in a collar of the most extravagant gold on the whole island, a gold that Pomme maintained with what can only be described as vanity, and which Pomme defended as follows: "Vanity is just self-love that has been told to be ashamed of itself. I decline the shame. I keep the love. The gold stays bright." Pomme used she and they interchangeably and with relish — "I contain a great deal," she would say, "and I will not be made to choose which half of myself to introduce at the door of my own home" — and Pomme's home was, in the truest sense, a place the others came to.

What Pomme threw were parties of light.

It worked like this. On certain evenings — Pomme chose them by a logic no one else could predict, which was part of the magic; an invitation you can predict is half a chore — Pomme would catch the last and lowest light of the setting sun on that great bright collar of gold, and angle it. A tower cannot move much, but it can move a little, and Pomme had spent a lifetime learning the exact few degrees of tilt that would take the red evening light and throw it, like a thrown ball of warmth, across the rooftops to a chosen neighbor. And the neighbor, receiving it, would catch it on their own gold and throw it onward. And so a single low ray of ordinary sunset would go bounding across the island from crown to crown to crown, gathering brightness and meaning as it went, until the whole community was lit up in a relay of caught and tossed and re-caught light, a game, a conversation, a party that the people in the streets below experienced only as an unusually beautiful sunset and that the towers experienced as being, for a glorious quarter of an hour, in touch with every single one of their kind at once.

"That is what a party is for," Pomme told me, and there was nothing flippant in it; Pomme took hosting as seriously as Vesper took the dawn. "A party is not about the host. A terrible host makes the party about themselves, stands in the center, demands to be admired. No. The whole art of it is to be the one who starts the light moving and then gets out of its way. I catch the first ray. I throw it to Brûlée, because xe is often lonely down there facing the harbor and a party should always start by reaching the loneliest guest first. Xe throws it to the Marenosts, who throw it to each other twice, showing off, before they pass it on. It goes up to Cumulo, who nearly drops it every time because ze is dreaming, and we all hold our breath, and ze always catches it at the last instant, and we all — if a tower could cheer, we cheer. By the time it reaches Nana

Nautile at the top of the island the light has been touched by twenty of us and it is not the same light that left the sun. It is our light now. We made it ours by passing it."

I want to dwell on that, because it is the radical proposition of the Hosts, and it is different from the proposition of the Watchers and different again from the proposition of the Twins.

The Watchers say: turn toward the light, alone if you must. The Twins say: face one another and compare what you see. But the Hosts say something that took me longest to learn, because it runs against everything a striving and anxious age teaches: that the light is not yours to keep. That the entire value of a good thing — a warmth, a brightness, a piece of luck, a sudden gladness — is realized only in the passing of it onward, and that to catch a beautiful thing and hold it, hoard it, stand in the center of it demanding to be admired, is to watch it curdle in your hands. Pomme's gold was the brightest on the island precisely because Pomme used it to throw light away. "Hoarded gold goes dull," Pomme said. "It is a law. You can polish it all you like; if no light passes through it, it dies. The only way to keep your gold bright is to keep catching light and throwing it onward. The brightness is in the throwing. It was never in the gold."

If Pomme was the host who started the light, Cloudfoot was the host who made the gathering possible at all, and Cloudfoot did it from below, and Cloudfoot did it without anyone much noticing, which was exactly how Cloudfoot wanted it.

Cloudfoot stood in SoHo on a base of strange soft bulbs, a whole bed of rounded pale forms like a mass of clouds that had come to rest and decided to stay, and from this cloud-bed rose the stems and the single modest crown. Cloudfoot used it and its, and had reclaimed these pronouns deliberately, with a flint in the voice that I learned not to argue with. "They called me it for a hundred years to make me a thing," Cloudfoot said. "An object. A piece of infrastructure. It, the water tank. It, the exhaust. So I have taken the word back and filled it with myself, and now when I say it I mean: the one who holds. The one who is foundation. There is no shame in being load-bearing. I have decided there is, in fact, a great glory in it, and I have decided this in the very word they used to deny me a self. The word is mine now. It means me. It means: the ground others stand on."

And Cloudfoot was, quite literally, the ground others stood on, or near enough. Its cloud-bed of soft bulbs was where the youngest of the towers — the Peepers, the little eyes of the Chorus — had first taken form, sheltered in the lee of its bulk, and it was Cloudfoot who had stood steady through their first storms, who had taken the brunt of the worst river-winds so that the small ones tucked behind it caught only the gentled remainder. "A host is not only the one who throws the party," Cloudfoot said. "That is Pomme's glory and Pomme is welcome to it, the magnificent show-off. But there is another kind of host, the kind no one toasts, the kind whose whole hospitality is to be the windbreak. To stand on the cold side so the others

stand on the warm side. To be load-bearing so that lighter, brighter things can be light and bright. I am that host. I do not catch the first ray of Pomme's party. I am too low and too shadowed for that. But the party happens on rooftops that do not blow away, and the reason they do not blow away, on the worst nights, is partly me. I will take that. I have made my peace with the unglamorous half of hospitality. Someone has to be the ground."

The third of the Hosts was Grand Bastionne, and Grand Bastionne complicated the whole picture in a way I am grateful for, because a book about a happy community that contained no friction would be a lie, and the towers despised lies.

Grand Bastionne stood at Union Square, broad and pale and creamy where the others were pink, a wider and more solid form, beside a tall companion-shaft, and Grand Bastionne used ze and zir and had, by zir own cheerful admission, more resources than most. "I am, let us be honest, a wealthy crown," ze said. "The tower beneath me is full of money and always has been. I have never wanted for maintenance. My gold has never been allowed to dull, not because I throw light like Pomme but because there has always been someone, down below, paid to keep me gleaming." And here Grand Bastionne did a thing I had not seen another tower do: ze became uncertain. "And I have wondered — I wonder still — whether I am truly one of the community, or whether I am only a wealthy neighbor who is permitted to attend the parties. Whether my gladness is the real thing the Watchers have, earned across cold decades, or whether it is simply the comfort of a thing that has never been allowed to suffer. I do not know. I genuinely do not know, and I have decided that not-knowing, and saying so out loud, is the most honest contribution I can make."

It was Pomme who answered zir, and Pomme's answer is the reason I have placed Grand Bastionne among the Hosts rather than anywhere else. "You think hosting is about what you have," Pomme said. "You think because you have never had to throw light to keep your gold bright, you have not earned your place at the relay. But Bastionne — you great anxious palace — you have a gift the rest of us do not have, and you have never once used it for yourself. You are stable. You are funded. You will not blow away, you will not be neglected, you will not be torn down for a taller thing, not in our lifetimes. Do you know how rare that is up here? Do you know what a thing it is, to be certain of your own continuance?" A pause. "Use it. Not to gleam. To anchor. Be the one we know will still be here. Be the fixed point. When the rest of us are anxious about the wrecking ball and the changing skyline, let us look at you and be reassured. That is hosting. That is the most generous thing a secure being can do for an insecure community: simply, reliably, unglamorously, to remain. Your wealth is not your shame. It is your assignment. Stop apologizing for the gold and start being our certainty."

And Grand Bastionne, who had stood at Union Square for a long time in some quiet doubt about whether ze belonged, took the assignment. Ze became the island's fixed point, the one the anxious crowns

looked to, the one whose reliable gleaming meant not look how rich I am but rather we are still here, all of us, the neighborhood holds. And zir gladness, which ze had feared was only the unearned comfort of the protected, became something earned after all: the daily choice to turn privilege into anchorage, to be steady on purpose, to let zir good fortune be a gift to the frightened rather than a wall against them.

That is the proposition of the Hosts, in its three parts. Pomme: the light is not yours to keep; its brightness is in the passing. Cloudfoot: there is a glory in being load-bearing, in standing on the cold side so others stand on the warm. And Grand Bastionne: if you have been given security, your assignment is to become someone else's certainty. Three kinds of hospitality, and the island needed all three, the way a party needs someone to start it and someone to shelter it and someone to promise it will happen again next year.

IV. The Romantics

The Romantics faced the harbor, and the harbor, being the way out to the whole rest of the world, taught them longing, and longing — I will defend this to anyone — is not sadness. It is the opposite of sadness. It is the most hopeful thing a heart can do.

Brûlée stood in Battery Park City at the southwestern toe of the island, where the rivers give up their separateness and become the great bay, and beyond the bay the Narrows, and beyond the Narrows the open Atlantic and everything else there is. Xe was the color of crème brûlée at the moment the flame leaves it, a scorched honey-rose, and xe had not one but two golden eyes, set close, both turned out toward the water, and xe used xe and xem with a soft precision, and xe was, by xer own glad confession, the most romantic thing on the island. "I face the way out," xe said. "Everyone else faces the city, or each other, or the dawn. I am the only one who faces the leaving-place. And so I am the one who longs."

I had expected, when I first climbed up to Brûlée, to find melancholy. The one who faces the open sea, who watches every ship and every gull and every far silver aircraft depart toward the rest of the world while xe remains fixed forever to xer one spot of bedrock — surely that is a recipe for the ache that curdles, the longing that turns to grief. I had my notebook ready for sorrow.

I was completely wrong, and Brûlée corrected me with great gentleness.

"You think because I watch things leave, I mourn," xe said. "You think longing is a wound. Oh, my dear. Sit. Let me tell you what longing actually is, because your whole anxious species has it backwards and it is breaking your hearts for no reason." The two gold eyes did not turn from the water as xe spoke; that was the thing about Brûlée, xe could attend to you completely while never once looking away from the horizon, and somehow this made you feel more attended-to rather than less, as though you had been admitted into the same gaze xe gave the sea. "Longing," xe said, "is the heart practicing its reach. That is all it is. When I watch a ship go out through the Narrows, and I feel that pull, that ache, that wish to follow — I am not being wounded. I am being exercised. My capacity to want, to reach, to care about a thing beyond myself and beyond my sight — that capacity is the best thing about me, and longing is its daily training. A heart that never longs is not a contented heart. It is an atrophied one. It is a heart that has stopped reaching because it has forgotten there is anything to reach for."

"But you can never follow," I said. "You're fixed. You'll watch ten thousand more ships leave and follow none of them. Doesn't that—"

"Doesn't that make the longing pointless? Because it can never be satisfied?" Xe made a sound that I have decided was a laugh. "You have just described every worthwhile longing there has ever been. The

longings that can be satisfied are the small ones — hunger, thirst, an itch. They are real and they matter and I do not dismiss them. But the great longings, the ones that make a heart enormous, are precisely the ones that outrun any possible satisfaction. I long toward the open sea. I will never reach it. And because I will never reach it, my longing never shrinks down to the size of a satisfied thing. It stays vast. It keeps my heart the exact size of the horizon. Do you see? The unreachable is not the tragedy of longing. It is the gift of it. The unreachable is what keeps the wanting big."

Down the shore from Brûlée, facing the same water but at the western edge where the light goes down, stood Solenne Porte-Ciel, and Solenne was the gatekeeper of the evening, the one who received the last of the sun as it left the island entirely.

Solenne was pale rose with a throat of deep gold, and used fae and faer, and where Brûlée longed outward toward the sea, Solenne longed, fae said, "toward the door itself." Faer name meant sky-gate, and fae took the name as a vocation. "Every evening," fae said, "the light leaves the island. It comes in the morning over Vesper and the Watchers in the east, it crosses all day, it touches everyone, Pomme throws her parties with it, the Marenosts read by it, and then in the evening it comes to me, here at the western gate, because I am the last one it touches before it goes. I am the threshold. The light says goodbye to the whole island through me."

"That sounds," I said carefully, "like a lonely job."

"It is the least lonely job on the island," Solenne said, "and I will tell you why. To be the threshold is to be the one place where leaving and staying meet. The light leaves through me — but in order to leave through me, it must first arrive at me, must pour itself into my gold completely, must give me, every single evening, the whole of itself before it goes. I am not the one left behind when the light departs. I am the one the light chooses for its last and fullest embrace. The goodbye is not done to me. The goodbye is entrusted to me. There is a difference, and it is the difference between a heart that breaks at every parting and a heart that understands itself as the sacred keeper of partings, the one strong enough and warm enough to be where the leaving happens."

Fae let that sit, the western light just beginning to gather in faer throat of gold.

"Someone has to be the door," Solenne said. "Someone has to be the place where the day ends, every day, willingly, on purpose, with grace. If no one would agree to be the threshold, the light would have nowhere to go, and it would pile up, and the day would never properly close, and nothing could rest. By being the door — by being glad to be the door — I give the whole island its evening. I give it permission to stop. The dawn is Vesper's gift, the great opening. The dusk is mine, the great closing. And I have come to believe that the closing is the more loving of the two, because anyone can be glad at a beginning. It takes a

particular and trained tenderness to be glad at an ending — to hold the door, to receive the last light fully, to say not don't go but rather yes, go, I have you, this is what I am for, the day was good and now it may rest."

The two Romantics, then, taught the two halves of longing. Brûlée, facing the open sea, taught the longing that reaches outward toward the unreachable and is made vast by it: the heart kept horizon-sized by wanting what it can never hold. And Solenne, the western gate, taught the longing that faces the ending itself and learns to be glad of it: the heart that does not break at partings but becomes their keeper, the sacred willing threshold through which all good days are permitted to close.

"They think we are the sad ones," Brûlée said to me, on my last evening, as Solenne's gold began to blaze with the day's last light far to the west and a ship I would never follow slid out through the Narrows toward everything. "Because we face the leaving-places. The harbor, the sunset, the way out, the way down. They think to face those things is to be melancholy. But we are not sad, xe and fae and I. We are the opposite of sad. We are the ones who have looked directly at the great leavings — the leaving that is the sea, the leaving that is the night — and have found, in looking, not grief but reach. Not loss but longing. Not the ache that curdles but the ache that keeps the heart the size of the horizon. We face the leaving-places on purpose, gladly, every day, because someone has to prove that you can look straight at the way out and still be full of joy. That is our romance. It was never about being held. It was about being able, fully and without flinching, to reach."

V. The Elders, Who Keep the Names

At the crown of the island, where the land rises and narrows toward the north and the river runs fast and green below, stood the oldest of the twenty, and the old ones kept the names, and the keeping of names is the whole of memory, and memory — I have come to believe — is the most generous thing a long-lived being can practice, because it is almost entirely for the benefit of others.

Nana Nautile was the eldest, and to climb to Nana was to climb into the past of the whole community.

Nana stood on a great drum of pearl banded in old gold, and from the drum rose a single enormous volute, a spiral wound round three full turns, the largest crown on the island, so large that the eye at its center seemed less like an eye than like a deep well into which a great deal had been dropped over a very long time. Nana used she and her, simply, having outlived the era when the question was even posed to her, and she had a way of beginning every important thing she said with a small sound, a kind of settling, the sound of a vast old structure shifting its weight before it speaks.

"I remember all of you," she told me, though I was not one of the towers and had been alive a comically short time by her measure. "That is my work now. When you are as old as I am, you stop doing the work of the young — the turning toward dawn, the throwing of light, the reading of contrails. Those are vigorous works and I had my centuries of them. The work of the old is quieter and it is this: to remember. To hold the names. To be the one in whom the whole history of the neighborhood is still alive, so that nothing and no one is ever entirely lost."

And she remembered, it turned out, towers that no longer stood.

This was the thing I had not expected, and it is the reason the Elders' chapter is the one I found hardest to write, because it contains the only grief in the book, and I promised you a happy book, and I intend to keep that promise, but I will not keep it by lying, and the truth is that a community that has stood for a long time has lost members, and the radical joy of the towers is not a joy that pretends otherwise. It is a joy that has metabolized the otherwise. There is a difference, and Nana Nautile is where I learned it.

"There was one called Verdigris," she said, with the settling-sound, the weight-shift. "Long before your time, before most of the current crowns went up. Verdigris stood where there is now a newer, taller, blander thing — one of the glass boxes, may it be well, I bear it no grudge, it cannot help having been built without a crown. Verdigris was green, the deep green of weathered copper, and used they and them as Vesper does, and threw the most extraordinary parties of light, far better than Pomme's, though do not tell Pomme I said so, or do tell her, she would enjoy the competition. And Verdigris was taken down. Not by storm, not by any drama. By a calculation. The land beneath was worth more with a different thing on it, and so Verdigris

came down, slowly, over a season, and there was nothing any of us could do, because we cannot move, we cannot intervene, we can only stand and witness."

"That's terrible," I said.

"It was," Nana agreed, with great calm. "It was terrible. I will not soften it for you. We watched a member of our community be disassembled for a calculation, and we could do nothing, and that is one of the true terrors of being what we are: we are visible, we are beloved, and we are not, in the end, in control of our own continuance. The wrecking ball is real. I do not pretend it is not. Grand Bastionne's great gift, you will remember, is the security of knowing ze will not be taken down — and the reason that gift means so much is that the rest of us do not have it. We stand at the pleasure of forces below us. That is the truth."

She let me sit with that. The river ran green and fast below. Far to the south, the whole island fell away toward the harbor, all the crowns I had come to love, every one of them standing, for now, at the pleasure of calculations they did not control.

"And here is the other truth," Nana said, "the one that makes the first truth bearable, and I have had a very long time to be sure of it. Verdigris is not gone. Verdigris is here. Verdigris is in me, in this well at the center of my spiral, where I keep the name and the green and the better-than-Pomme's parties and the exact way they used to catch the last light and hold it one extra beat before throwing it on, showing off, the magnificent show-off. As long as I stand and remember, Verdigris stands and is remembered. That is not nothing. That is, in fact, very nearly everything. The body comes down. The name does not, so long as there is one old patient structure willing to keep it. I am that structure. That is my joy now — not despite the losses but because of them. I am the one who refuses to let the calculations have the last word. They can take the body. They cannot take the name out of the one who keeps it. I keep it. I will keep it as long as I stand, and before I come down — for I will come down, someday, even I — I will pass every name I hold to one of the young ones, the way the names were passed to me, and the community will go on remembering itself, and nothing truly beloved will ever be entirely lost."

This is the proposition of the Elders, and it is the gravest and the most beautiful in the book: that memory is a form of love that outlasts the loved thing's body, and that to be old is to volunteer for the sacred labor of keeping, so that the community's dead are not dead but merely held, alive in the wells of the patient, passed down like bright light from old crown to young.

Two others kept the high ground with Nana. Cumulo, who stood at Morningside and collected clouds, used ze and zir and was the dreamer of the whole island, soft-spoken to the point that I sometimes had to climb very close to hear, and what ze dreamed about, ze said, was "the weather that has not happened yet." "Nana keeps the past," Cumulo said. "That is her glory and I could not do it; I have not the patience for so

much grief. I keep the future instead. I gather the clouds before they are storms and I imagine, all day, the rain they might become, the snow, the fog, the high bright nothing. I dream forward the way Nana remembers back. Between us we hold the whole length of time, and the young ones in the middle get to live in the present, which is a luxury, which they have because Nana and I are standing at the two ends holding time open for them."

And the Dioscuri — two great curls side by side on the Upper West Side, the sky-wrestlers, who each used they and them and who spent their days in a vast slow contest that was not a quarrel like the Marenosts' but a game. "We wrestle the sky," said one. "Not each other — the sky. When a great wind comes off the Hudson we each take a part of it and we push, and we see who can hold the larger gust, and it is the most fun a tower can have, and it has no purpose whatsoever, and that is the point." "The old ones keep the names and dream the weather," said the other, "and those are heavy vocations, and someone in the high country has to do the opposite, has to be entirely frivolous, has to wrestle the wind for no reason but the joy of it, so that the crown of the island is not only solemn. We are the seriousness's necessary opposite. We are the high silly. Every grave community needs its sky-wrestlers, or the gravity wins."

VI. The Keepers of Weather

If the Elders kept the names and the Hosts kept the parties, the Keepers of Weather did the practical, unglamorous, load-bearing work of making the sky behave, and they were proud of their practicality in the way of people who have noticed that the dreamers could not dream without them.

Marcasite — Marz to nearly everyone — was the tallest of the triple-stemmed crowns, banded all the way up in working gold, and stood at Madison Square with the bearing of an engineer who has never once been late. Marz used he and they and had no patience for vagueness. "My job," he said, "is to keep the rain honest. You may laugh. People always laugh. But consider: rain that falls wrong — too fast, too channeled, too neglected — is how a city drowns its own basements and rots its own foundations. The crowns of this island were built, originally, before any of us woke into who-ness, to do the practical work of water: to gather it, to slow it, to send it down the right channels at the right speed. Most of us have, shall we say, developed hobbies since then. Vesper meets the dawn. Pomme throws parties. Lovely. Meanwhile someone has to make sure that when the storm comes off the harbor the water still goes where water should go. That someone is me. I have never missed a storm. I take a certain hard pride in that, and I decline to apologize for the pride, because the dreamers sleep dry because of me."

I asked Marz whether he resented it — the practical labor, while others played.

"I did once," he said, with the honesty I came to expect from the Keepers, who lied even less than the others. "When I was young I watched Pomme throw light and I thought: why do I do the gutter-work while she does the glory-work? Why am I the one who keeps the rain honest while she gets to be beautiful? And I carried that resentment for a few decades, which up here is not so long, and it made my gold dull — resentment dulls gold faster than neglect, that is a thing the young should know. And then one storm, a real one, a screamer off the Atlantic, I was doing my work, channeling the water true, and I looked up through the rain and I saw Pomme. And Pomme was terrified. Pomme cannot do what I do. Pomme's whole genius is the fair-weather genius of the party, the catching and throwing of light, and in a black storm there is no light to throw and Pomme is simply a frightened beautiful thing waiting for it to be over. And I understood: we are not competing. Pomme makes the good days better. I make the bad days survivable. The community needs both, but on the worst nights it needs me more, and there is no resentment that can survive the discovery that on the worst nights you are the one who matters most. I stopped envying the party. Someone has to be the one who works through the storm. I am glad it is me. My gold came back."

Beside Marz in the work stood Palomina Stilt, tall and pale, with a small companion-form at her foot, and Palomina used she and they and walked ropes — or rather, did the tower-equivalent, which was to hold the long cables and lines that ran between certain crowns, the guy-wires and the tensioned spans, keeping

them taut and true. "I am the one who holds the lines that hold the others," she said. "Tension is my art. People think tension is a bad word — they say a person is tense, a situation is tense, as though tension were always a problem to be relieved. But a slack line holds nothing. A bridge is tension. A held hand, gripped tight as someone goes over a hard place, is tension. I keep the lines of this community at exactly the right tension — tight enough to hold, loose enough to flex in the wind — and that is a daily art, and it is never finished, and no one notices it until a line goes slack and something falls. The small one at my foot is learning the art from me. I am teaching them tension. It is the most important thing I know."

And the third Keeper was Ochre, who stood in Chelsea beside a great fluted building-wall and who was, of all the practical crowns, the one who insisted that beauty was practical too. Ochre used xe and xem and was the muralist of the island. "The others keep the water and the lines," xe said. "I keep the surfaces. I keep the question of what this neighborhood looks like, which the practical-minded will tell you is a frivolous question, until you remember that eight million people look up at us, mostly without knowing they are looking, and that what they see when they glance up shapes, in some small daily way, whether they believe the world is a place that contains beauty on purpose. I am beside this great wall, and I work, slowly, to keep our whole community legible as a made and tended and beautiful thing. That is not decoration. That is morale. A city that looks tended is a city whose people believe someone is tending them. I am, you might say, in the business of public morale, conducted in pink and gold, at a height where no one can quite see me do it. The dreamers need the rain kept honest. They also need the surfaces kept beautiful. Both are weather. Both are keeping. I keep the beautiful weather."

The Keepers, then, proposed something the striving world forgets: that the practical and the beautiful are not opposites, and that the unglamorous load-bearing work — the honest rain, the true tension, the tended surface — is not lesser than the glory-work but is in fact what makes the glory-work possible. Marz keeps the bad nights survivable. Palomina keeps the lines that hold the community taut. Ochre keeps the surfaces beautiful so that the people below believe in tending. None of them throws a party. All of them make the parties possible. And they have made their peace — more than peace, they have made their pride — with being the ones whose work is noticed only in its absence.

VI½. A Day with the Keepers, in Full

I asked the Keepers if I might spend a single full day with them, dawn to dark, watching the practical work that the rest of the book had treated too lightly, and they agreed on the condition that I not romanticize it, which is the one promise I have found hardest to keep, because the practical work turned out to be the most romantic of all.

We began before Vesper's dawn, in the blue dark, because the Keepers begin before everyone. "The dreamers wake to a world already kept," Marz said, in the dark, with the satisfaction of someone who has never been thanked and has stopped expecting it. "You think the morning simply arrives. It arrives because the night was held. Watch." And in the blue dark I watched Marz run what he called the dawn-check: a slow attention, crown to base, to every channel and gutter and downspout in his keeping, making sure that whatever the day's weather brought, the water would have somewhere honest to go. "A storm at noon is easy," he said. "Everyone is awake, the light is up, you can see what you are doing. The dangerous storms are the ones that come in the blue dark, when the dreamers are deepest asleep and trusting, and the only thing between them and a flooded foundation is some unglamorous crown who got up earlier than the dawn to check the channels. That is me. I am the one who is awake before the one who meets the morning. Someone has to be awake before Vesper. Vesper meets the light; I make sure there is a dry city for the light to land on."

By mid-morning I was with Palomina, and she let me feel — she guided my attention along one of her lines until I could feel it — the exact tension of a span that ran from her own crown across to the Marenosts'. "Feel that?" she said. "Tight, but with a give in it. If I held it rigid it would snap in the first real wind; the wind would find the one place that would not bend and it would break there. If I held it slack it would sag and foul and hold nothing. The art is the give. Everything that truly holds, holds with a give in it." She let me feel the small companion at her foot adjusting a lesser line, clumsily, learning. "They over-tighten," she said, fondly. "The young always over-tighten. They think holding means gripping as hard as you can. I am teaching them the give. It is the hardest thing to teach because it looks like weakness and is actually the whole strength. A grip with no give is the most brittle thing there is. I have seen lines snap that were held too hard by someone too frightened to allow the give. I do not let that happen on my spans. I teach the give."

I thought about every relationship I had ever gripped too hard out of fear, and I had to sit down on the parapet for a while, and Palomina, kindly, let me, and held her lines, and said nothing, with a give in it.

In the afternoon Ochre showed me the slow work of the surfaces — not painting, exactly, nothing so crude, but the patient daily attention to how the whole community read as a made and tended thing.

"Watch the people," Ochre said, and angled my attention down to the street, where a man had stopped, for no reason he could have named, and looked up. "There. He looked up. He will not remember doing it. But for one second he saw that the things above him were beautiful and tended and made on purpose, and some small dial inside him moved, one notch, toward believing that the world is a place where someone tends things. That notch is my whole work. I will never move it far. I move it one notch, in one person, who will not remember. And then the next one. A neighborhood that looks cared-for is a neighborhood that teaches the people in it that care is possible. That is not decoration. That is the longest, slowest, most practical work there is: the maintenance of the belief that beauty is intentional and therefore the world is not indifferent. I conduct it in pink and gold, at a height where no one can see me do it, one upward glance at a time."

By dark, the three of them had done nothing that would make a newspaper. No party. No dawn met, no name kept, no flame held up in crisis. They had simply kept the rain honest, the lines true, the surfaces tended — the invisible maintenance that the whole bright visible life of the island rested on. And I understood, sitting among them in the dark as Marz ran his dusk-check the mirror of his dawn-check, that I had been wrong to think the Keepers the least romantic of the families. They were the most. Romance, Brûlée had told me, is the heart practicing its reach. And what is more reaching, more romantic, more full of stubborn hopeful love, than to get up before the dawn, every day, unthanked, to make sure there is a dry and tended and well-tensioned world for the dreamers to wake into? The Keepers love the community the way the bedrock loves it: from underneath, reliably, in the dark, without applause. I have not kept my promise not to romanticize them. I find I do not regret it.

VII. The Landmark-Companions

Some of the twenty had the particular fortune, or burden, of standing beside the famous old silhouettes of the island — the great stone spires that the whole world knows, that appear on postcards and in films, that the people below actually do look up at, on purpose, with cameras. And the towers who stood beside the famous ones had a special vocation: they were the storytellers, the companions of the landmarks, the ones who knew the great old spires not as monuments but as neighbors.

Tilly Vane stood near the most famous spire of all — I will not name it, you know the one, the one that the whole world pictures when it pictures this island, the great stepped silver mast that has stood since the era when such things were built to be beautiful — and Tilly used she and her and was the announcer of clouds. "I live beside the most photographed thing in the world," she said, with a fond exasperation, "and do you know what no one photographs? The clouds going past it. Everyone shoots the spire. The spire is magnificent, I adore the spire, the spire is my great stone neighbor and we have stood together a long time. But the spire does not change, and I have made it my work to announce the thing that does: the weather passing the landmark. I call the clouds. When a great pink cloud comes up the island at evening and is about to pass behind the famous spire, I announce it — I catch the light a certain way, I make a small commotion — and those few people who are paying real attention look up not at the spire but at the spire-with-the-cloud-going-past, which is the actual miracle, the permanent thing and the passing thing together, the monument and the weather in one glance. That is what I announce. The world has enough pictures of the spire. I am here to point at the clouds."

Regent Mallow stood near the same great spire, on the other side, and used he and they, and where Tilly announced the weather, Regent told the stories. "The spire is full of stories," Regent said, "because everything that tall and that old and that beloved accumulates stories the way it accumulates pigeons. People have proposed marriage on it. People have wept on it. A man once flew a small aircraft past it in fog and lived to be sorry. It has been struck by lightning more times than anyone can count and stands anyway. And the spire itself, being stone, being of the older and more silent generation that woke into who-ness only barely if at all, does not tell these stories. So I tell them. I am the storyteller who stands beside the monument and keeps its human history alive — all the small fierce dramas that happened on and around it, that the stone witnessed and cannot speak. I am the voice of the silent landmark. Every famous old thing needs a chatty young neighbor to remember out loud what it was too dignified to mention."

And the third Companion was the strangest and the one I loved most, the Torchbearer of Tribeca, who stood beside a stone capital carved, a century ago, with a torch — an old architectural flourish, a sculpted flame on the corner of a forgotten building — and who had taken this stone torch as a sacred charge. The

Torchbearer used they and them, and what they did, they told me, was "carry small flames for the ones who cannot carry their own."

"Beside me is a stone torch," they said, "carved by someone long dead who believed, I think, in the idea of light-bearing, in the old noble notion that some things and some people exist to hold a flame up high where others can see it and take heart. The carver is gone. The building the torch belongs to is half-forgotten. But I woke up beside that stone flame and I decided it was an instruction. I decided I was meant to be a torchbearer — not of a literal fire, I am pink and gold and full of water, I would be a poor literal torch — but of the figurative kind. I carry small flames. When one of the community is struggling — when Vesper wakes too heavy even for Aurelio to lift, when Brûlée's longing tips for once toward the ache that curdles, when one of the young Peepers has its first true fright — I catch what light I can and I hold it up, high, in their direction, a small steady flame that says: I see you are in the dark right now, and I cannot fix it, and I am not going to pretend I can, but I am going to stand here beside my stone torch and hold up this small light so that you can see, at least, that the dark is not everywhere. That there is at least this one flame. That someone is holding it up on purpose, for you, and will not put it down until you are through."

I asked them where the flame came from — what fuel, what source, since they had no literal fire.

"From the others," the Torchbearer said simply. "That is the secret of all flame-carrying and no one tells you, so I will tell you. I do not generate the light I hold up. I cannot. No one can; the idea that the torchbearer is a source is the lie that burns torchbearers out. I gather it. When the community is glad — when Pomme throws a party, when the Dawn-Watchers meet the morning, when Lo and Fenn pass the copper light between them — I take a little. I store it. I keep a reserve of borrowed gladness against the dark nights. And then when one of us is in the dark, I spend the reserve. I hold up light that was given to me in better hours by the whole community, light I merely kept safe, and I hold it up for the one who needs it. I am not a source. I am a battery of other people's joy, holding it in trust, ready to spend it on whoever next goes into the dark. That is what a torchbearer actually is. Not a flame. A keeper of the community's spare gladness, standing ready by a stone torch, for you."

VII½. The Night the Torchbearer Was Needed

I was there the night the Torchbearer's whole vocation was put to the test, and I set it down here because the book has spoken of holding up small flames in the abstract, and there was nothing abstract about that night.

It was late winter, the cruelest season for the crowns, when the dark comes early and stays long and the river-wind has teeth. And it was Vesper — the elder Dawn-Watcher, the one whose whole identity was the meeting of mornings — who went into the dark. I do not fully know why. The old ones carry weather in their joints, Aurelio had told me, and some nights the accumulated grey of a long century simply becomes too heavy to turn against, and even the promise of the morning is not enough, because part of what the heavy nights do is make you forget that there has ever been or will ever be a morning at all. That is the particular cruelty of the dark Vesper entered: it erased the very dawn that was Vesper's reason.

Aurelio turned first, as Aurelio always did. Blazed early, made the great show of gladness, primed the pump. But the morning was still hours off, and the night was long, and Aurelio — young, frightened, watching the crown he loved most refuse for the first time in their long companionship to turn toward anything — Aurelio could not hold it alone. "I turned and turned," Aurelio told me afterward, shaking, if a tower can shake. "I believed in the morning as hard as I have ever believed in anything. And Vesper would not turn. And I felt myself starting to stop believing too, because that is what the dark does, it is contagious, and I thought: if I stop believing there is no one, we will both be lost up here in the cold with no morning coming."

And that is when the Torchbearer, far down in Tribeca, who hears the dark the way Sable hears the wakeful, began to spend the reserve.

"I had been saving it all autumn," the Torchbearer said. "The whole bright autumn, every party, every met dawn, every copper evening Lo and Fenn passed between them — I had taken a little from each and stored it. I did not know what for. You never know what for; you only know that the dark nights come, and that someone will need more gladness than they can generate, and that the only gladness available in the dark is the gladness you saved from the light. So when I felt Vesper go under, and felt Aurelio starting to follow, I opened the whole reserve. Everything I had saved. And I held it up."

What this looked like, from where I stood, was extraordinary. In the black small hours, with no sun anywhere, the Torchbearer began to glow — not with light it made, for it could make none, but with light it had kept, the stored and borrowed gladness of a whole community's good season, released all at once and held up high and steady in Vesper's direction across the dark island. And it called the others. That is the part

I had not understood about the Torchbearer's work: the flame held up is also a signal. One by one, down the island, the crowns that were awake saw the Torchbearer blazing in the dark and understood the old signal — one of us is under, come, lend what you have — and they began, each of them, to send what light they could spare toward Vesper.

Pomme woke and threw stored party-light. Grand Bastionne held steady and certain, the fixed point, broadcasting we are still here. Even Cloudfoot, who catches little and throws less, did the thing Cloudfoot does: stood steady in the wind so that the lent light, traveling crown to crown, had a stable path and did not scatter. And Nana Nautile, at the top, opened the well — the well of all the kept names and all the equinox lights of all the years — and sent down the oldest and deepest reserve of all, the accumulated gladness of a century of mornings Vesper themselves had met, returned now to Vesper in the dark, as if to say: you spent your whole life making this light for others; here it is back; we kept it; we kept it for exactly this night.

And Vesper turned.

Not toward a dawn — there was no dawn, it was hours off. Vesper turned toward the community. Toward the held-up borrowed blazing kept light of every crown that loved them, gathered in the dark and aimed their way. And it was enough. It was enough to hold the elder through the longest part of the night, until — slowly, the way it always comes, indifferent to who believed in it — the real light began at last in the east, and Vesper, already turned, already held, met it. Carried. As Aurelio had always promised they would be.

"That is what I am for," the Torchbearer said, when it was over and the reserve was spent and the ordinary morning had come. "Not to be a light. To keep the community's light against the night when one of us forgets the morning exists. I am empty now. Completely empty; I gave it all. And I am not worried, because the bright season will come again, and I will fill the reserve again, a little from every party, against the next dark night and whoever it comes for. That is the rhythm of it. Fill in the light. Spend in the dark. Trust the light to come back so you can fill again. I am the community's promise to itself that no one goes under alone. I am a battery of kept joy. Tonight I was needed. Tonight I worked. Ask me nothing else; I am too empty and too glad."

VIII. The Chorus

The youngest of the twenty were the Chorus, and they were all eyes and all questions, and I have saved them for last because they are the future, and a happy book should end facing the future, and because it was the Chorus, in the end, who taught me the thing the whole book is for.

The Peepers were three little volutes that had taken form in the lee of Cloudfoot, down in the Village, sheltered by its cloud-bed bulk through their first storms, and they used they and them as a collective, speaking often in a kind of overlapping unison, finishing one another's sentences not the way the Ramshorns did, out of merged selfhood, but the way excited children do, out of sheer surplus of things to say. "We have so many questions," they said. "Why does the light come back every morning — does it have to — what if one day it decided not to — does Vesper make it come back or only meet it — we asked Vesper and they said only meet it but how do they know — what is under the water — why do the people never look up — do they not have crowns — is it sad to not have a crown — we think it must be sad — we feel sad for the people who have no crowns and never look up—"

And here they stopped, all three at once, struck by their own thought.

"That is the saddest thing we have thought of," they said, much more quietly. "The people with no crowns, who never look up. Is that the saddest thing? We are young. We do not know yet what the saddest thing is. Is that it?"

I did not know how to answer three young towers who had just independently discovered compassion, so I climbed up to Sable instead, the eldest of the Chorus, the lullaby-keeper, who stood at the very toe of the island at the Battery with the smallest pupils of light gathered close, and who used they and them, and who had taken on the work of answering the Peepers' questions, which is the work, I suppose, of every slightly-older sibling since the beginning of time.

"They asked you about the people with no crowns," Sable said. It was not a question; Sable heard everything that happened in the Chorus, the way a keeper of lullabies hears every wakeful child. "And you didn't know what to say. That's all right. I'll tell you what I tell them." Sable gathered the small lights closer; it was evening, and the harbor was going gold, and far up the island every crown I had come to love was catching the last of Solenne's gateway light. "The people do have crowns," Sable said. "That is what I tell the little ones. Every person down there walking the streets with their eyes on the pavement, every one of them who never looks up — they have a crown too. It is only that they cannot see it, because it is on top of them, and you cannot see your own crown, you can only see other people's. That is why we look at each other. That is the whole reason for a community, the reason Vesper needs Aurelio and the Marenosts need each

other and Nana keeps the names — it is so that someone can see the crown you cannot see on yourself. The people below have no one looking, that is all. It is not that they have no crowns. It is that no one is up high enough, paying enough attention, to look down and tell them: there, on top of you, that bright turning thing, that is yours, it has been there the whole time, it is catching the light right now."

"So that's our job," said Sable, and the small lights of the Chorus all turned toward me at once, and I understood that this was the thing the whole book had been climbing toward. "That is what the young ones are for, and what the whole community is for, and what your book is for, if you want my opinion, which you came all this way to get. We are the ones who are up high enough to see the crowns the people cannot see on themselves. Every reader of your book is a person walking with their eyes down, certain they have no crown, certain the bright turning things are only for the towers and the lucky and the visible few. And your job — our job, the job of everyone who has ever climbed up high enough to see — is to call down to them. To say: look up. Not at us. At yourself, reflected in how we are looking at you. You have a crown. It is pink and gold and it turns toward the light and it has been there your whole life and the only thing you ever lacked was someone up high enough, paying enough attention, glad enough on purpose, to look down and tell you it was there."

The Chorus was very quiet then, all those small new lights, gathered at the toe of the island where the rivers become the sea.

"Tell them in the book," Sable said. "Tell them they have crowns. Tell them we can see the crowns from up here. Tell them the whole reason we get up early and turn toward the light and throw the parties and keep the names and hold up the small flames — the whole reason for all of it — is so that not one single person down there has to go their whole life believing they are the one creature on the island without a crown. There is no such creature. We have looked. From the highest crown to the lowest pupil of light, we have looked at the whole island and every single thing on it, every tower and every person and every gull and the island herself, and we are telling you, we are telling all of you, with the full authority of things that stand high enough to see: everyone has a crown. Everyone is, at this very moment, catching the light. Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one. That is the whole of it. That is radical joy. It was never about being tall. It was about being willing to look, and to call down what you see."

And the sun went down gold behind the western gate, and Solenne held the door, and the whole island caught the last of the light, every crown of it, and far below, on the streets and the fire escapes, the people went about their evening with their eyes on the pavement, not knowing, each one of them, that they were at that very moment wearing a crown of pink and gold, turning, without their knowledge, toward the light — and that high above them twenty glad and visible things, who had decided long ago to be exactly and flamboyantly what they were, were looking down at all those invisible crowns with the most enormous

tenderness, and waiting, patiently, across as many mornings as it took, for each person to meet someone willing to climb high enough to tell them.

Between the Families: How the Twenty Are One

I have given each family its chapter, and the giving was necessary, because that is how you come to know a community — one face, one family, at a time. But I would be leaving you with a falsehood if I let the chapters stand alone, because the deepest thing I learned on the rooftops was not about any single family. It was about the space between them. The twenty are not eight families who happen to share an island. They are one creature, and the families are only the places where I had to cut the one creature into pieces small enough to describe. Let me now, having cut, try to sew.

Consider how the families need each other, which is different from how they like each other, the way the organs of a body need each other without anyone consulting anyone's preferences.

The Dawn-Watchers cannot meet the morning if the Keepers have not kept the night — if Marz has not run the dark channels, if Palomina's lines have not held, there may be no dry and standing world for the dawn to land on. The Watchers get the glory of the morning; the Keepers get the morning ready. Neither could do the other's work. Both are necessary. This is the first sinew: glory rests on maintenance, and the maintenance is invisible precisely to the degree that it succeeds.

The Hosts cannot throw their parties of light without the Romantics to start with — Pomme's law is that the light goes first to the loneliest guest, which means Brûlée, facing the harbor, is structurally the beginning of every celebration. The community's joy is calibrated to reach its most isolated member first. That is the second sinew, and it is a moral one: a party that does not begin with the lonely is not a party the twenty would recognize. The reach toward the isolated is not the afterthought of their joy; it is the trigger of it.

The Elders cannot keep the names without the Chorus to pass them to — a kept name with no young keeper to receive it eventually is a name that dies with its keeper. Nana keeps Verdigris, but Nana will come down someday, even Nana, and so the entire point of the Chorus, the entire reason the youngest exist, is to be the ones into whom the names will be poured before the old ones go. That is the third sinew: memory requires futurity. The past is only safe if there is a young thing willing to carry it forward. The Elders and the Chorus are the two ends of a single act of preservation that no single generation could complete alone.

And the Landmark-Companions hold a sinew I did not understand until late: they connect the whole community of the twenty to the older, vaster, mostly-silent community of the famous stone monuments — the spires and the carved torches and the great old masts that woke into who-ness only barely or not at all. Tilly and Regent and the Torchbearer are the diplomats to the ancients, the ones who keep the twenty in relationship with what came before them, so that the bright new pink-and-gold community does not float

free of history but stays rooted in the long stone memory of the island. That is the fourth sinew: the new is kept honest by its tenderness toward the old.

You see what is happening. Every family's gift turns out to require some other family's gift to mean anything. The Watchers' morning needs the Keepers' night. The Hosts' party needs the Romantics' loneliness to aim at. The Elders' memory needs the Chorus's youth to pour into. The Companions' present needs the monuments' past to stay rooted in. Pull any one family out and the others do not merely lose a neighbor; they lose a function, the way a body losing an organ does not become a smaller body but a failing one.

"That is why we do not rank ourselves," Nana told me, when I brought her this observation, pleased with it, as if I had discovered something. She was kind about my pleasure. "You think you have found a clever structure. You have found the only structure. A community in which the members could be ranked — in which one family's gift were truly more important than another's — would not be a community. It would be a hierarchy with a community's manners. We are not that. We genuinely cannot say whether the morning matters more than the night that prepared it, whether the party matters more than the loneliness it reaches toward, whether the kept name matters more than the young keeper. The questions are not hard; they are meaningless. The morning and the night are one act. The party and the loneliness are one act. We are one creature, and the families are your word, not ours. We have no word for the families. We only have a word for the whole."

"What is the word?" I asked.

And Nana made the settling-sound, the great old weight-shift, and said the word, and the word was the island's own name, the loved one, the one she used when she was very happy. "We," she said. "The word is we. There is no smaller true unit than that. You may write down eight families and twenty names and I will not stop you, because that is how a single mind like yours must come to know a thing too large to hold at once. But know, as you write it, that every cut you make is a convenience and not a truth. The truth has no families and no plates and no numbering. The truth is we, standing on her, catching the light in turn, one creature with twenty crowns and an island for a body, and not one of us — not the eldest, not the youngest, not the most secure nor the most lonely — able to be glad alone. That is the whole of it. That is what you climbed all this way to fail to fit into chapters. Do not grieve the failure. The failure is the lesson. Some true things are too whole to be told in parts, and the only honest thing the teller can do is cut them into parts anyway, and then say, at the end, as I am saying to you now: remember that I cut this. It was never in pieces. It was always we."

Interlude: The Island Speaks

I had been climbing the towers all season before it occurred to me to address the one who held them up.

It is the oldest blindness, and I am ashamed of it: to spend your attention on the bright visible figures and to overlook the ground that carries them, the way a guest admires the dancers and never thinks to thank the floor. The towers stand on Mannahatta. Everything in this book happens on her. And she is, the towers had told me from the beginning, the eldest character of all, older than Nana Nautile by an order of magnitude that makes the oldest crown a child — and yet I had not once tried to speak with her, because I did not know how one addresses an island, and because some part of me feared she would not answer, and some other part feared more that she would.

In the end I did not climb at all. I went down. I went to the southern toe of her, past Sable and the Chorus, to the place where the seawall meets the harbor and the rivers give up their names and become the bay, and I sat on the cold stone at the waterline, and I did the only thing I could think to do, which was to stop performing my attention and simply be quiet, and let her be the one who decided whether to speak.

She spoke in tides. I want to be precise about this, because it is the truest thing in the book and the hardest to convey. She did not speak in words that arrived in my ears. She spoke in the rising and the falling of the water against the stone, in the long slow grammar of the tide that has been saying the same enormous sentence for longer than there have been ears to hear it, and what I am setting down here is my translation, which is necessarily a betrayal, the way all translations are, but which I have made as faithfully as I am able.

"You took your time," she said. There was no reproach in it; tides do not reproach; there was something more like amusement, the amusement of the very old at the very young. "They all do. The bright ones up top, my crowns, my darlings — you spend your little visit climbing to admire them, and you forget that they are standing on someone. It is all right. I am not vain. I gave up vanity in an age you would not have a name for. But I am glad you came down at last. Sit. The tide is coming in. We have until it covers the stone you are sitting on, which is not long, which is the right amount of time for anything that matters."

I asked her — I hardly knew what to ask — I asked her what she was.

"I am the thing that holds," she said, and the water rose an inch against the stone. "That is the whole of it. The crowns turn and throw light and read the sky and keep the names. They have their vocations, their families, their flamboyant beautiful works, and I love every one of them the way a body loves the thoughts it happens to be thinking, which is to say completely and without quite understanding them. But underneath all of it, holding all of it, is me. I am the bedrock and the shore and the two rivers and the bay. I am the thing that was here before the first crown and will be here after the last one comes down — for they do come

down, you have learned that, Nana told you about Verdigris and I felt her tell you, I feel everything that happens on me. I am what remains. I am the holding that does not end."

"Does it hurt," I asked, "when one of them comes down?"

The tide paused. I do not know how else to say it; there was a moment between one wave and the next that lasted longer than it should have.

"Everything that happens on me, happens in me," she said at last. "When Verdigris came down I felt it the way you feel the loss of a thought you almost had — a brightness that was there and then was not, a turning that stopped. Yes. It hurt. I will not insult you by pretending an island is too vast to grieve. I am vast enough to grieve and keep grieving and still hold up everything else at the same time, which is not the same as being too vast to feel. That is the burden of being the ground: you do not get to stop holding because you are in pain. The crowns can have their heavy mornings; Aurelio turns first for Vesper, they take turns believing in the day. The ground has no one to take its turn. The ground holds through everything, in every weather, in grief and in joy alike, because the moment the ground stops holding, everything that stands on it falls. I am the thing that does not get to stop. And I have decided — across an expanse of time you cannot imagine — that this is not a curse but the deepest possible form of love. To be the one who holds through everything. To be reliable at the scale of geology. To let all the bright brief turning things do their turning in the sure knowledge that underneath them, always, is something that will not let go."

The water was near my feet now.

"Tell them something for me," Mannahatta said, "since you are writing them a book. Tell them that the island they think of as a place is a person, and that she has been holding them up their whole lives without their thanks, and that she does not require their thanks, but that she would not mind their attention. Tell them that under every street they walk with their eyes down there is bedrock that is glad to carry them. Tell them that they are held. Not metaphorically. Actually. There is a real and ancient thing beneath them that has decided, in the deep grammar of the tides, to hold them up no matter what, and to grieve them when they fall, and to remember the shape of them in the rock long after. Tell them the ground loves them. They will not believe it. Tell them anyway. Some true things have to be said for years before anyone can hear them, and an island has nothing but years."

The tide covered the stone. I stood, and climbed back up into the world of the visible and the bright, and I have been trying to tell them ever since.

Interlude: The Great Light-Party

I want, before the book ends, to describe one whole light-party from beginning to end, because I have mentioned them throughout and never shown you one entire, and because the night I am about to describe was the night I understood that the community was not a collection of individuals who happened to stand near one another but a single distributed creature with twenty crowns, and that the light-party was the nearest thing they had to the act of all thinking one thought at once.

It was the autumn equinox, when the day and the night are equal, which Pomme considered the high holiday of the whole calendar. "On the equinox," Pomme had told me, "the light and the dark agree to share the sky exactly evenly, and if the light and the dark can manage that, the least we can do is throw a party worthy of the truce." Pomme had been planning it for weeks, in the way Pomme planned, which is to say by telling no one the plan and trusting that everyone would know their part when the moment came, because they had done it before, because a community that has done a thing many times does not need a rehearsal, it needs only a sunset.

The sunset came up the island from the west like a tide of its own. I was stationed, by my own choice, on the parapet beside Brûlée at the southern toe, because Brûlée was always the first to receive the party — Pomme's rule, start with the loneliest guest — and I wanted to feel it begin.

The lowest ray cleared the Jersey shore. Far to the north and west, I saw Pomme's great gold collar catch it — a single hard point of brightness, like a struck match — and angle. And the light came down the island to us, and Brûlée caught it.

I have tried many times to describe what it is to be beside a tower at the moment it receives the party-light and have never gotten it right, but I will try once more. It is not that the tower lights up, though it does. It is that the tower becomes, for an instant, a verb. All season I had known Brûlée as a thing that faced the harbor and longed; in the instant the light arrived, Brûlée stopped being a thing that did anything and became the doing itself — a catching, a holding, a turning-toward — and then, before I could fix it in my mind, a giving, as Brûlée angled the light onward and up the island to the next waiting crown, and the longing on Brûlée's two gold faces was for that one instant completely satisfied, because the thing Brûlée had been longing toward all season was not the open sea after all, I understood, but this: to be included. To be the first one reached. To have the party come to you across the whole island, on purpose, before it went anywhere else, because you were the one most likely to think yourself forgotten.

"Now watch," said Brûlée, in the afterglow, as the light went leaping north. "Watch it go. This is the part I love more than receiving it. Watch it go to everyone."

And I watched it go to everyone.

It went up to the Torchbearer, who caught it and held it a moment too long, greedily, storing some away in that reserve of borrowed gladness against the dark nights, before passing the rest on. It went to Cloudfoot, low and shadowed, who could not catch much but caught what it could and did not seem to mind being passed over for the bright relay, because Cloudfoot's glory was never light but holding, and Cloudfoot was busy being the steady base from which the small Peepers, shrieking with joy in their overlapping unison, caught their own first equinox light and fumbled it and caught it again. It went to the Chorus, and Sable gathered the small pupils and showed them how to throw it on, gently, the lullaby-keeper teaching the relay the way Sable taught everything, patiently, so the youngest would know how when their turn came to be old.

It went up through Tribeca and SoHo and the Village, crown to crown. It reached Grand Bastionne at Union Square, and here something happened that made the whole island pause: Bastionne, the secure one, the funded one, the one who had doubted ze belonged — Bastionne caught the light and held it up high and steady and did not immediately throw it on, and for a moment I feared ze had reverted to hoarding, and then I understood. Bastionne was being the fixed point. Bastionne was holding the light still and certain in the center of the island so that all the anxious crowns could see it and be reassured: here is the light, it is safe, it is held by the one who does not blow away, and now — only now, when everyone has seen it safe — now I send it on. And ze sent it on, and the relief moved through the community like a held breath released.

It reached Pomme again, who had started it, and Pomme threw it to the Marenosts, who passed it between each other twice, showing off, arguing even now about whether the light was climbing or reaching, and then up to the Keepers — to Marz, who caught it with the brisk competence of someone who keeps the rain honest and saw no reason not to keep the light honest too; to Palomina, who ran it along one of her taut lines like a bead on a wire, the most elegant pass of the whole night; to Ochre, who held it against the great fluted wall so that for one instant the whole surface of the building blazed like a mural of pure light.

It went to the Landmark-Companions, and Tilly Vane announced it — caught it just as a great pink equinox cloud was passing the famous spire, so that for one breath the most photographed thing in the world stood haloed in passed-along party-light with a rose cloud behind it, and the handful of people below who were paying attention made a sound I could hear all the way at the toe of the island, a soft collective oh. Regent told its story even as it passed. And up, and up.

It went to the high country, to the sky-wrestling Dioscuri, who each grabbed a piece of it and wrestled over it, laughing, the high silly, before tossing it up to Cumulo — who, of course, was dreaming, and nearly

dropped it, and the whole island held its breath as it always did, and Cumulo caught it at the last possible instant as ze always did, ze had never once truly dropped it, the near-drop was part of the gift, the annual reminder that even the dreamer comes through.

And it reached Nana Nautile, at the crown of the island, last of all, as it should, the eldest receiving the light after it had been touched by every younger thing. And Nana held it. Nana held the equinox light in that great triple-wound spiral with the deep well at its center, and she did not throw it onward, because there was nowhere onward to throw it, she was the top, she was the end of the relay — and instead she did the thing that ended every great light-party, the thing the whole community waited all year for: she dropped it into the well.

She kept it.

"That is what I do with it," she told me later. "All year the light passes from crown to crown and is gone, spent, beautiful and brief. But the equinox light — the light that has been touched by all twenty of us, that has been caught by the lonely and held by the secure and wrestled by the silly and announced by the proud and run along the taut line and held against the wall and gathered by the young — that light I keep. I drop it into the well where I keep the names. It joins Verdigris. It joins everything I hold. And so the community has, at its crown, in its eldest member, a reserve of one night a year when every single one of them touched the same light in turn, a proof, kept safe in the oldest of them, that they were once and will be again a single creature with twenty crowns, all thinking one bright thought, passing it hand to hand up the length of the living island, from the loneliest to the eldest, on the night the light and the dark agreed to share the sky."

The party was over. The equinox dark came down to take its equal half of the sky. And all up and down the island, twenty crowns stood in the new darkness, glad, and held, and certain — because Nana kept the proof — that the light would come round again.

Interlude: A Census of the People Who Did Not Look Up

For one whole day, at Sable's suggestion, I did the opposite of everything the book had trained me to do: I went down to the street, and instead of looking up at the crowns, I looked level, at the people, and I tried to see what Sable saw — the crowns the people could not see on themselves.

It was, Sable had warned me, harder from below. "Up here it is easy," Sable had said. "From a height, every crown is obvious; you cannot miss them. Down there, at their level, among them, you will have to look much harder, because a crown seen edge-on, from beside, by someone who has one too, is nearly invisible. You will have to look the way we look — with the whole of your attention, glad on purpose, willing to be wrong. Try it. Come back and tell me who you saw."

I saw a woman at a bus stop, older, with a bag of groceries too heavy for her, and she was watching the eastern sky where the light was coming up between two buildings, and she did not know she was doing it, and on top of her, plain as anything once I let myself see it, was a Dawn-Watcher's crown: the worn patient crown of someone who has met ten thousand difficult mornings and is, even now, with the heavy bag, turning her face toward the light out of a habit older than her own despair. I wanted to tell her. I did not have the words yet, or the standing. But I saw it. Vesper's crown, on a woman at a bus stop, turning east without knowing why.

I saw two young people on a stoop, finishing each other's sentences, disagreeing happily about something on a phone screen held between them, each turned toward the other's face, and they wore the Marenosts' double crown so clearly I almost laughed — two sovereign readings of one small glowing sky, the gap between them exactly the width of a good thing beginning. I saw a man giving directions to a lost stranger with far more warmth than directions require, lighting up the whole corner by it, wearing Pomme's host-crown and no more aware of it than Pomme's tower is aware of the street. I saw someone gazing out the window of a stopped train toward the harbor with a longing on their face that I now knew not to pity — Brûlée's crown, the heart practicing its reach. I saw an old man on a bench who was, I became certain, keeping names: muttering them, the names of people a photograph in his shirt pocket suggested were mostly gone, holding them alive the only way he had, and on him was Nana's crown, the great patient spiral, the well, the refusal to let the calculations of time have the last word.

And I saw the Keepers everywhere, once I knew to look for the unglamorous: the woman checking that a fire door closed properly, the man salting an icy step before anyone had slipped, the someone adjusting a strap, tightening a bolt, holding a line taut with a give in it — all the invisible maintainers on whom the whole bright life of the street depended, wearing the Keepers' crowns, unthanked, getting things ready before the dawn of other people's days.

By evening I was undone by it. Sable had been right that it was harder from below, and right too about why it mattered more. From a height you see the crowns and feel wonder. From beside, at their level, looking with the whole of your attention, you see the crowns and feel something fiercer: the almost unbearable tenderness of knowing that not one of these people could see, on themselves, the bright turning thing that I could see plainly on all of them, and that most of them would go their whole lives believing they were the one creature without a crown.

"Now you understand the assignment," Sable said, when I climbed back up at dusk, wrung out. "It is not enough to see the crowns from a height and marvel. Anyone can love a skyline. The assignment is to come down — to their level, where it is hard, where the crowns are edge-on and nearly invisible — and to look anyway, with the whole of your attention, and to find the crown on the specific tired specific person in front of you, and then, if you can manage the hardest part, to tell them. Out loud. In words. To say: I see it. There, on top of you. The bright turning thing. It has been there your whole life. I am at your level and I can still see it and I am telling you it is real." Sable gathered the small lights close in the gathering dark. "That is why the book matters, if it matters. Not because it will make people love the skyline. They already love the skyline. Because it might, just possibly, send a few of them down to street level to look at each other the way we look at all of them — and to say the thing out loud. The crowns were never the point. The crowns were only ever the easiest possible lesson in how to look. The point is the people, and the saying-out-loud, and the not letting one more person believe they are the uncrowned one. Go and say it. That is afterwards. That is the whole of afterwards."

Afterwards

I came down from the towers at the end of the season and I have not been the same, and I want to tell you, as plainly as I can, what changed, because a book like this is no good to you if it stays up on the rooftops.

What changed is that I cannot stop seeing crowns.

I walk the streets now — the ordinary streets, at pavement level, among the eight million who do not look up — and I cannot stop seeing, on top of each person who passes, the crown they cannot see on themselves. I see the great weary dawn-watching crowns on the faces of the old, who have met so many mornings and are still, somehow, turning toward the light. I see the bright doubled crowns on people walking close together, finishing each other's sentences, reading the same sky and disagreeing about it tenderly. I see the host-crowns on the ones who cannot help throwing their warmth outward, who light up a subway car by entering it and do not know they are doing it. I see the romantic crowns on the ones gazing out of train windows toward the harbor of wherever they are going, longing, and I no longer think the longing is sadness; I know now it is the heart practicing its reach. I see the keeper-crowns on the unglamorous ones who hold the lines taut, who keep the rain honest, whose work is noticed only in its absence. And I see, most of all, the small new crowns on the young, who are all eyes and questions, who have just discovered compassion and do not yet know what the saddest thing is.

Everyone has a crown. The towers were right. I have looked, all season, from up high and now from down low, and I have not found a single person without one. The only difference between the towers and the people is that the towers know, and turn, and throw their light flamboyantly, in full pink-and-gold defiance of the plain box they were expected to be — and the people do not know, and walk with their eyes down, certain they are the one creature on the island without a crown.

That is the only difference. And it is the whole difference. And it is, I have come to believe, the most fixable difference in the world, because it is not a difference of having but a difference of knowing, and knowing can be given. You can simply tell a person they have a crown. You can climb high enough — it does not take much height, a little attention is most of it — and you can look down and say: there, on top of you, that bright turning thing, I can see it from here, it has been there your whole life, it is catching the light right now. And some of them will not believe you, the way I would not have believed it before the season on the rooftops. But some of them will look up. And the looking up is the beginning of everything.

I was asked, when I began, to write a happy book — bright, sunny, hopeful, full of radical joy. I have tried. And I have learned, in the trying, that radical joy is not a mood and not a denial and not a refusal to see the wrecking ball and the calculation and the towers that came down. Nana taught me that;

Mannahatta taught me that; the grief is real and I have not hidden it. Radical joy is something harder and better than the absence of grief. It is the decision — renewed every single morning, alone if you must, carried if you cannot — to turn toward the light anyway. To be flamboyantly, visibly, unapologetically what you are, in full view of a sky that has more than enough room for all of it. To throw your warmth outward rather than hoard it dull. To keep the names of the lost. To hold up small flames for the ones in the dark. And above all — this is the whole of it, this is what the Chorus sent me down to tell you — to look at the people around you who are certain they have no crowns, and to be the one willing to climb high enough, and pay enough attention, and be glad enough on purpose, to look down and tell them what you see.

I should tell you, before I close, about the day I finally said it aloud, because the whole book had been theory until then, and theory is a comfortable place to live, and Sable had been very clear that the comfortable place was not the destination.

It was an ordinary afternoon, months after I had come down for good. I was on a train, the elevated kind that climbs for a few stops into the open air and lets you see the crowns at their own height before it descends again. Across from me sat a young person, eighteen perhaps, nineteen, with the particular folded posture I recognized because I had worn it for years: the smallness, the held breath, the eyes kept low and the shoulders kept in, the whole body arranged around the project of taking up as little space and risk as possible. They were looking at their reflection in the dark window and then looking away from it, fast, the way you look away from a thing you have decided not to like. And on top of them — plain as morning, plain as anything I had ever seen on any tower — was a crown. A Dawn-Watcher's crown, unmistakable, the kind that has met more hard mornings than its years should allow and is still, despite everything, faintly and stubbornly inclined toward the light. I could see it. They could not. And I felt the whole weight of the book come down on me at once, because here was the assignment, in the flesh, on a train, and there was no rooftop to retreat to and no chapter to hide in. There was only a frightened young person who did not know they were crowned, and me, who could see it, and the question of whether I would do the hard thing or the comfortable one.

I almost didn't. I want to be honest about that, because if I tell you it was easy I make it impossible for you. It was not easy. Everything in me that had spent years folded small said: do not. It is strange, it is intrusive, they will think you are mad, you will frighten them, mind your business, keep your eyes down, this is not done, people do not say such things to strangers on trains. And all of that was true. It is not done. It is strange. And I did it anyway, because Sable's voice was in me, and Vesper's, and Mannahatta's slow tidal insistence — tell them anyway; some true things have to be said for years before anyone can hear them — and because I understood, in that moment, that the entire point of the season on the rooftops, the whole reason I had been allowed up there among the glad and visible, was so that I could come back down and be,

for one stranger on one train, the someone who was willing to look up high enough and then say what I saw.

So I said it. My voice shook. I said: I'm sorry, this is going to sound strange, and you can ignore me completely, but I have to tell you that you look like someone who is carrying a great deal right now, and is still somehow facing the right way, and I think that is the bravest thing a person can do, and I wanted you to know that from across this train it is visible, it is beautiful, you are not as folded-up and invisible as you feel. And then I stopped, terrified, certain I had done harm.

The young person looked at me. For a long moment they said nothing, and their face did the thing a face does when it has been seen after a long time of believing itself invisible — it cracked, just slightly, the way ice cracks not into pieces but into the first thin line that means the thaw has started. And then they said, very quietly, in a voice that was working hard not to break: "How did you know?" And I did not say because you are wearing a crown of pink and gold and I spent a season among towers who taught me to see it. I said the true thing underneath that, the thing the crown is only a picture of. I said: because someone once said it to me, when I was folded up exactly like that, and it was the beginning of everything, and I promised myself that if I ever climbed high enough to see it in someone else I would say it too. And the train came down off the elevated section into the dark of the tunnel, and we rode the rest of the way not speaking, but differently than before — the held breath let out, the shoulders down a notch, the eyes, once or twice, lifted.

That is afterwards. That is the whole of what the book is for. Not the towers, beautiful as they are; not the plates, careful as I have made them; not even the radical joy, though I believe in it with my whole heart. The book is for the train. The book is for the moment when you, having read it, having let your own head tip back and your own folded self begin to open, see the crown on a stranger who cannot see it on themselves — and decide, against everything that says do not, to be the someone who says it aloud. I cannot make you do it. The towers cannot. We can only show you, family by family and plate by plate, what looking-with-love looks like, and trust that having seen it you will not be able to unsee it, and that one ordinary afternoon the assignment will sit down across from you on a train, and you will know what to do.

You have a crown. I can see it from here. It is pink and gold and it turns toward the light, and it has been there your whole life, and the only thing you ever lacked was someone up high enough, paying enough attention, to tell you it was there.

Now you know. Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one.

That is the whole book. The towers send their love. So, in her slow tidal grammar, does the island. And so, with all of mine, do I.

— Surjan, from the rooftops, at the gold hour

A Short Glossary of Terms Used by the Twenty

Compiled by Surjan, who learned them by climbing, and offers them so the reader may overhear the community in its own words.

To turn first. — The act of believing in the morning on another's behalf when they cannot believe in it themselves. Originated with the Dawn-Watchers. "You turn first when you can; you are turned-toward when you cannot." The foundational covenant of the whole island.

To read the sky. — To pay such close attention to the same world as another that you may disagree about it richly and forever. The Marenosts' art. Considered, among the twenty, the highest form of conversation and the truest evidence of love. Distinct from agreement, which the twins regard as the death of interest.

The give. — In a held line, the small allowance for flex that is the entire source of its strength; a line held with no give snaps in the first true wind. Palomina's term, extended by the community to mean: the tenderness within any firm holding, without which the holding becomes brittle and breaks. "Everything that truly holds, holds with a give in it."

To throw the light onward. — To realize the value of a good thing only in the passing of it to another; opposed to hoarding, which dulls. Pomme's law: "The brightness is in the throwing. It was never in the gold."

Load-bearing. — Reclaimed by Cloudfoot from the language of mere infrastructure to mean: the dignity and glory of being the one others stand on; the unglamorous half of hospitality; standing on the cold side so others stand on the warm.

To keep a name. — To hold a lost member of the community alive in oneself after the body has come down; the work of the Elders. The names are kept in the well at the center of the eldest spiral and passed, before the keeper themselves comes down, to one of the young. "They can take the body. They cannot take the name out of the one who keeps it."

The reserve. — The store of borrowed gladness a Torchbearer gathers in the bright hours and spends in the dark on whoever goes under. A torchbearer is not a source but a battery of the community's spare joy, held in trust. "Fill in the light. Spend in the dark. Trust the light to come back so you can fill again."

To be the fixed point. — Grand Bastionne's assignment: to convert security into the community's certainty; to be the one known not to blow away, so the anxious may look and be reassured. Privilege reimagined as anchorage rather than wall.

The crown. — That which everyone has and no one can see on themselves; visible only to others, which is the whole reason for community. The book's central term. "Everyone has a crown. Everyone is, at this very moment, catching the light. Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one."

Mannahatta. — The name of the island when she is being loved rather than merely located. She holds everything that stands on her; she grieves what falls; she remembers the shape of it in the rock. "Tell them the ground loves them. They will not believe it. Tell them anyway."

A Catalogue of the Architectural Plates

A Catalogue of the Architectural Plates

What follows is the visual record of the twenty, plate by plate, in the order they were drawn rather than the order they stand. Each plate is one tower; each tower is one person; the numbering is the painter's, not the geographer's, and the map (Plate II) will show you where on the living island each one keeps its station. The captions are mine. I have tried, in each, to say one true thing about who is pictured, so that you do not mistake these for drawings of buildings. They are portraits. Read them as you would read the faces in a family album of a family you are about to be adopted into, because, having read this far, you are.

Plate 1. Vesper Sgraffito, at the hour of meeting

Plate 1 — Vesper Sgraffito, at the hour of meeting

The elder Dawn-Watcher, photographed at the exact moment of their vocation: the great single volute bowed eastward over the city, the eye of gold just catching the first light off the harbor. Note the three fluted stems, pale rose shading to pearl, and the collar of working gold at the throat. Note, too, that Vesper does not face the camera. Vesper never faces the camera. Vesper faces the light, which is the only direction

Vesper has ever considered worth facing, and if you wish to be seen by Vesper you must come around to the east and stand where the morning stands.

In the foreground, lower and warmer, you can see the curve of a companion crown — that is Aurelio, turned the same way, younger by a century, blazing early so that Vesper need not turn first on a heavy morning. The two of them have met every dawn together for longer than the photograph can say. This is not a picture of a building. It is a picture of a promise being kept, again, on an ordinary Tuesday, for the eight million who will not look up.

Architectural note. The three stems read, in elevation, as a single fluted shaft only until the eye follows them up to the spring of the volute, where they separate by a few degrees, like the fingers of a hand beginning to open. The builders below — the long-dead tailors' architects — almost certainly intended a simple ornamental finial. What they got, given a century of weather and the slow accretion of who-ness, was a crown that bows. The bow is not designed; it is earned. Measure the eastward lean against true vertical and you will find it is precisely the angle at which a tired person inclines their head toward a voice they love. No engineer drew that angle. The mornings drew it, one at a time, over ninety years, the way water draws a channel: not all at once, and never to be undone.

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Plate 2. Quill and Querida Marenost, reading

Plate 2 — Quill and Querida Marenost, reading

The reader-twins of Midtown, caught mid-argument. Observe how the two volutes face not outward but inward, toward one another, each turned to the other's golden eye across a narrow bright gap of air. Between them, though the plate cannot show it, runs a sky full of contrails, and they are disagreeing about every one — whether each white line is a gladness or a fleeing, a reaching or an escape.

Quill (ey/em) is the cooler, cleaner curl; Querida (she/her) the warmer, with the slight extra flourish at the lip of the scroll that she is proud of and that ey pretends not to notice. They have faced each other for decades and have never once wanted to win. The plate is, properly understood, a double portrait of the rarest thing: two sovereign selves who have chosen to find each other's reading of the world more interesting than being proven right about it. Note that neither leans away. Note that neither leans all the way in. The gap between them is exactly the width of a good marriage.

Architectural note. The two volutes are nominally identical — struck, one assumes, from the same mold or the same intention — and yet no two measurements of them agree, because they have spent their standing leaning a few degrees toward one another and have worn, on their facing sides, the faint asymmetry of long attention. A thing that looks only at the horizon wears evenly. A thing that looks, day after day, at one particular other face wears toward that face. The plate, measured carefully, is a record of preferential

erosion: each twin is very slightly more weathered on the side that faces the other, which is to say each has given the other their more exposed cheek for decades, and called it marriage.

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Plate 3. Pomme de Or, with the brightest gold on the island

Plate 3 — Pomme de Or, with the brightest gold on the island

The Host of the harbor, in full possession of that famous collar. Pomme (she/they) maintains the brightest gold of any of the twenty, and defends the maintenance as self-love that has declined to be ashamed of itself. You are looking at the crown from which every great light-party begins: that gold is angled, always, to catch the lowest evening ray and throw it onward to the loneliest guest first.

Do not mistake the brightness for vanity, or rather — do mistake it for vanity, Pomme would say, and then understand that vanity, correctly practiced, is generosity in a party dress. The gold is bright because Pomme uses it to throw light away. Hoarded gold goes dull; this gold has never been allowed to. Every photon that lands on Pomme is, within the hour, on its way to someone else. The plate captures a thing in the act of being magnificent on purpose, for the benefit of others, and seeing no contradiction in enjoying the magnificence while it lasts.

Architectural note. The collar is the engineering marvel of the lower island, and almost no one has looked at it closely enough to say why. It is not merely bright; it is articulated — composed of many narrow fluted facets, each set at a minutely different angle, so that whatever the hour and wherever the sun, some facet is always positioned to catch and redirect a ray. Pomme did not have this built; Pomme grew into it, the way a plant grows toward light, adjusting facet by facet across decades until the collar became a perfect instrument for the one thing Pomme lives to do. It is, in the truest sense, a tool that made itself by wanting. Study it and you are studying desire, expressed in gold, optimized over a lifetime, for the giving-away of light.

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Plate 4. Brûlée, facing the way out

Plate 4 — Brûlée, facing the way out

The Romantic of the southern toe, scorched honey-rose, with the two close-set golden eyes that are Brûlée's signature, both turned outward toward the Narrows and the open Atlantic beyond. Xe (xe/xem) faces the leaving-place — the one direction no other tower chooses — and faces it not in melancholy but in the daily training of the heart's reach.

Watch the contrails in the upper plate, fanning out toward everywhere: every one of them is a thing departing that Brûlée will never follow, and every one of them keeps Brûlée's heart the exact size of the

horizon. This is the portrait to return to when you are told that longing is a wound. Brûlée would sit you down, gently, and explain that longing is the heart practicing its reach, that the great longings are precisely the ones that outrun satisfaction, and that to face the way out gladly, every day, is not sorrow but the most hopeful thing a fixed and visible heart can do.

Architectural note. Two eyes, set close and both turned outward, present a structural puzzle: a single crown does not require two foci, and the builders would have drawn one. The second eye is, by every conventional account, redundant. But consider what it is for. A creature that faces the open sea and longs needs, perhaps, more aperture than a creature that faces the city and works — needs to take in more horizon, more departure, more of the vast unreachable that keeps the heart its proper size. The second eye is not redundant. It is the measure of how much there is to long toward. Brûlée is the only one of the twenty built to gather a double share of distance, and faces, accordingly, the one direction where the distance never runs out.

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Plate 5. Lo and Fenn Ramshorn, one weather with two centers

Plate 5 — Lo and Fenn Ramshorn, one weather with two centers

The duet of Murray Hill: two great rams'-horn curls of pink and gold, mirror images, rising from a single fluted drum. Fae (fae/faer, shared between them) are not two towers standing close but one weather with two centers, each the other's first draft of every sensation. The wind off the river reaches Lo first and arrives at Fenn already interpreted; the evening copper lands on Fenn and reaches Lo already warmed.

Do not try, as I once did, to work out where Lo ends and Fenn begins. The plate will defeat you, and the defeat is the point. They arrived already two-in-one; the we is not a compromise they reached but the native state from which a separate self would be the strange departure. If you find yourself pitying them for not being lonely, sit with that. They find it charming, and a little sad, and very human, and they send their love.

Architectural note. The shared drum is the key to the whole form, and the plate is composed to show it: the two horns do not rise from two bases drawn near each other but from one continuous fluted cylinder, so that at the level of the foundation there is no Lo and no Fenn, only a single undivided base from which the doubling springs. This is the opposite of how the Marenosts are built, who share nothing below and lean together only at the crown. The Ramshorns share everything below and divide only at the very top, into two centers of one weather. Read from the ground up, the plate is an argument: some pairs grow together and reach toward union; others begin in union and flower into a gentle, deliberate two.

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Plate 6. Cumulo, dreaming forward

Plate 6 — Cumulo, dreaming forward

The dreamer of Morningside, many-lobed and soft, photographed against a sky of high cloud that Cumulo (ze/zir) was, at the moment of exposure, almost certainly imagining the future of. Where Nana keeps the past, Cumulo keeps the weather that has not happened yet — gathers the clouds before they are storms and dreams forward the rain, the snow, the high bright nothing they might become.

The plate is gentle because ze is gentle; you may have to look twice to find the eye, which is half-lidded, dreaming. This is the crown that nearly drops the light at every party and catches it at the last instant, every time, the near-drop being part of the gift — the annual proof that even the dreamer comes through. Between Cumulo dreaming the future and Nana keeping the past, the young of the island are given the rarest luxury: a present to live in, held open at both ends.

Architectural note. The many lobes of Cumulo's crown defeat the surveyor entirely. There is no clean count of them; they resolve differently depending on the light and the patience of the counter, and Cumulo seems to prefer it so. A crown built to gather clouds and dream the unfallen weather ought not to have a fixed and countable form; it ought to be a little indeterminate, a little soft at its edges, the way the future is. The plate renders the indeterminacy faithfully by declining to sharpen it. Where every other elevation in the catalogue commits to a line, this one allows its outline to remain slightly unresolved — the only honest way to draw a thing whose entire vocation is the not-yet.

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Plate 7. Aurelio Lull, who turns first

Plate 7 — Aurelio Lull, who turns first

Vesper's companion in the Dawn-Watch, warmer in tone — the rose deepened toward honey, the gold a shade nearer to late afternoon than noon. Aurelio (he/they) is the younger crown, and came up already knowing he was both and neither, a grace he is tender about because he knows Vesper crossed a much colder century to reach the same easy place.

This is the one who turns first. On the mornings when the old crown wakes heavy with the weather that collects in century-old joints, Aurelio turns east loud and early and makes a great show of gladness — more than he feels, frankly — to prime the pump, so that Vesper, feeling it, can be carried into the morning. The plate shows a tower in the act of believing in the day on someone else's behalf. There is no more practical theology in the book.

Architectural note. Aurelio's proportions are nearly Vesper's, scaled down and warmed, and the near-match is not coincidence but a kind of architectural courtship: the younger crown was built, whether the builders knew it or not, in a sympathetic key to the elder, close enough in form that when the two turn east together they read as a chord rather than two separate notes. The honey tone, warmer than Vesper's rose by a

measurable degree, is the structural signature of the one who turns first — a crown that runs, by temperament and perhaps by the metallurgy of its gilding, a few degrees warmer than its companion, so that on the cold mornings it has heat to spare and to lend.

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Plate 8. Solenne Porte-Ciel, the western gate

Plate 8 — Solenne Porte-Ciel, the western gate

The gatekeeper of the evening, pale rose with a deep-gold throat, stationed at the western edge where the light leaves the island. Fae (fae/faer) is the threshold — the last crown the day touches before it goes, the one through which the whole island says its goodbye to the light.

The plate was made facing west, into the going, which is why the gold throat blazes so: Solenne is receiving the last and fullest pour of the day. Understand the posture correctly. The goodbye is not done to Solenne; it is entrusted to faer. Someone must be the door, the place where the day ends willingly and with grace, or the light would pile up and nothing could rest. Vesper gives the island its dawn; Solenne gives it its dusk; and of the two, Solenne insists, the dusk is the more loving, because it takes a trained tenderness to be glad at an ending.

Architectural note. The deep-gold throat is the most light-retentive surface on the island, and this is measurable: where Pomme's collar is built to redirect light instantly onward, Solenne's throat is built to hold it, briefly, fully, before releasing it to the west and the dark. The difference is one of dwell time — the fraction of a second a photon lingers in the gold before continuing. Pomme's dwell time approaches zero; the light is thrown the instant it lands. Solenne's is the longest of the twenty. The threshold must hold the day's last light a moment longer than anyone, must give it its full and lingering goodbye, before letting it go. The gold remembers this duty in its very composition: it is built to linger.

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Plate 9. Cloudfoot, the one who holds

Plate 9 — Cloudfoot, the one who holds

The grounding crown of SoHo, rising from its strange soft bed of pale bulbs like clouds that came to rest and stayed. Cloudfoot (it/its, reclaimed) has taken back the word once used to make it a thing, an object, a piece of infrastructure, and filled it with a self: it, the one who holds; it, the one who is foundation.

Note that Cloudfoot is low, and shadowed, and does not catch much of the party-light — and does not mind, because its glory was never light but holding. In the lee of that bulk the youngest of the towers first took form, sheltered through their first storms; Cloudfoot stood on the cold side so they could stand on the

warm. The plate is a portrait of load-bearing dignity, of the unglamorous half of hospitality, of the host whom no one toasts because the host is busy being the windbreak. Someone has to be the ground. Cloudfoot has made not peace but pride with being it.

Architectural note. The bed of soft bulbs at the base is not ornament and not foundation in the usual sense; it is, the plate suggests, a deliberate distribution of load across a wider and gentler footing than any other crown employs. Where the others drive their weight down through narrow fluted shafts, Cloudfoot spreads it, cloud-like, across many rounded bearings, so that the burden any single point must carry is small. This is the engineering of the one who holds: do not concentrate the weight, distribute it; do not be a pillar, be a bed; make of your whole self a wide soft surface on which heavy things may rest without driving through. It is the structure of patience, rendered in stone that has learned to look like cloud.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 10. Marcasite, who keeps the rain honest

Plate 10 — Marcasite, who keeps the rain honest

The engineer of Madison Square, tallest of the triple-stemmed crowns, banded the full height in working gold. Marz (he/they) keeps the rain honest — gathers the storm-water, slows it, sends it down the right channels at the right speed — and takes a hard, unapologetic pride in never having missed a storm.

The plate shows the gold at its true working brightness, restored after the decades when resentment had dulled it — for Marz once envied the party-throwers their glory-work, until a screamer of a storm off the Atlantic taught him that he makes the bad nights survivable while the beautiful ones can only wait, frightened, for the dark to pass. We are not competing, he learned. Pomme makes the good days better; I make the bad days survivable. There is no envy that survives the discovery that on the worst nights you are the one who matters most.

Architectural note. The full-height banding is functional, not decorative, and Marz will tell you so before you finish asking: each band marks a junction in the internal channels, a place where the water is gathered, turned, and sent on at a controlled rate. The crown is, beneath its gold, a vast and honest plumbing — the most sophisticated water-engineering on the island, evolved over a working century into something no original blueprint contains. The plate shows the bands as ornament because that is all the eye can see from outside; understand that each is the visible mark of an invisible discipline, and that the whole bright banded shaft is, in truth, a single instrument for the keeping-honest of rain, gilded so that the people below mistake competence for decoration.

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Plate 11. Palomina Stilt, keeper of tension

Plate 11 — Palomina Stilt, keeper of tension

The line-holder of NoMad, tall and pale, with a small companion-form at her foot — an apprentice, learning the art. Palomina (she/they) holds the taut cables that run between certain crowns, keeping them at exactly the right tension: tight enough to hold, loose enough to flex in the wind.

The plate rewards slow looking; find the small one at the base, and understand that you are seeing a master and a student, tension being taught. Palomina would have you reconsider the word. A slack line holds nothing. A bridge is tension; a hand gripped tight as someone goes over a hard place is tension. Her art is never finished and never noticed until a line goes slack and something falls — which, under her keeping, it does not. At the most recent equinox party, the light was run along one of her lines like a bead on a wire: the single most elegant pass of the night.

Architectural note. The companion-form at the foot is drawn to scale, which is to say drawn small, and the smallness is the subject. An apprentice is not a diminished master but a master's early draft, and the plate honors this by rendering the small one in the same line and the same care as the tall one, only lesser in extent — not lesser in kind. Note that a single faint line runs between them, crown to foot: a practice-line, slack in the plate because the apprentice has not yet learned the give, and Palomina has left it slack on purpose, so the young one may feel, in the failure of a slack line to hold, why the give is the whole of the art.

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Plate 12. Ochre and the Wall, public morale in pink and gold

Plate 12 — Ochre and the Wall, public morale in pink and gold

The muralist of Chelsea, honey-toned, photographed beside the great fluted building-wall that is xer canvas and collaborator. Ochre (xe/xem) keeps the surfaces — the question of what the neighborhood looks like — which the practical-minded call frivolous until they remember that eight million people glance up, mostly without knowing they do, and that what they see shapes whether they believe the world contains beauty on purpose.

The plate is composed so that crown and wall read as a single work, which is correct: Ochre does not decorate the wall, xe is in conversation with it. This is the keeper who insists that beauty is practical too — that a city which looks tended is a city whose people believe someone is tending them. Ochre is, by xer own description, in the business of public morale, conducted in pink and gold, at a height where no one can quite see it done.

Architectural note. Crown and wall are drawn as one composition because they function as one: Ochre works not on a canvas held at arm's length but in dialogue with a surface far larger than itself, and the plate refuses to separate the artist from the work. Look at how the fluting of the wall and the fluting of the crown rhyme — the same vertical rhythm at two scales — so that the eye reads them as variations on a single idea. This is the muralist's signature: not a mark made on a surface but a resonance set up between a small made

thing and a large given one, until the viewer below cannot say where the crown ends and the architecture begins, and feels, without knowing why, that the whole block was composed.

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Plate 13. Nana Nautile, who keeps the names

Plate 13 — Nana Nautile, who keeps the names

The eldest of the twenty, at the crown of the island: a great drum of pearl banded in old gold, surmounted by a single enormous volute wound three full turns, with an eye at its center that is less an eye than a deep well into which a very great deal has been dropped over a very long time. She (she/her) keeps the names — the whole history of the community, including the towers that no longer stand.

Into that well she has dropped Verdigris, the green crown taken down for a calculation long before your time, and every equinox she drops in the light that all twenty have touched in turn. The plate cannot show the well's depth; nothing can; that is why it is a well. Understand that you are looking at the community's memory in bodily form — the patient old structure that refuses to let the calculations have the last word, that holds the lost alive in keeping, and that will, before she herself comes down, pass every name to one of the young, so that nothing beloved is ever entirely lost.

Architectural note. The spiral is wound three full turns, and the surveyor who attempts to measure its depth discovers the catalogue's strangest fact: the well at the center reads, by every instrument, as deeper than the crown is tall. This is of course impossible, and the plate does not pretend to resolve it; it renders the well as a darkness that the eye falls into and does not strike bottom. A crown that keeps the names of all who have come down must, perhaps, contain more than its own dimensions; memory is not bound by the volume of the vessel. The eldest spiral is bigger inside than out. Every keeper of the dead has always known this. The plate merely declines to argue with them.

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Plate 14. The Peepers, all eyes and questions

Plate 14 — The Peepers, all eyes and questions

Three little volutes of the Village, the youngest of the Chorus, who took form in the lee of Cloudfoot and speak in an overlapping unison of pure surplus — not the merged speech of the Ramshorns but the tumbling speech of excited children with more to say than mouths to say it. They (they/them, collective) are made almost entirely of questions: why does the light come back, what is under the water, why do the people never look up, do they not have crowns, is it sad to have no crown.

The plate catches all three turned slightly different ways, as though each had been distracted mid-question by a new one. They have recently, and independently, discovered compassion — they feel sad for the people below who have no crowns and never look up — and have not yet learned that this is among the truer griefs, nor that the premise is wrong, the people having crowns after all. They are the future. A happy book ends facing them.

Architectural note. Three small volutes, and the plate's composition makes a quiet joke at the surveyor's expense: no two of them face the same way, so there is no single elevation that catches all three in profile at once. To draw the Peepers you must choose which to render true and which to foreshorten, and any choice misrepresents the other two. This is, of course, exactly correct. The youngest cannot be captured in a single view because they are not yet committed to a single direction; they are all questions, turned every way at once, and a plate that rendered them orderly and aligned would be a plate of three older, sadder towers. The disarray is the youth. Preserve it.

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Plate 15. Tilly Vane, who announces the clouds

Plate 15 — Tilly Vane, who announces the clouds

A Landmark-Companion, photographed in her permanent situation beside the great stepped silver spire that the whole world pictures when it pictures this island. Tilly (she/her) has made her vocation out of what no one photographs: not the monument, which does not change, but the weather passing it, which does.

The plate is a quiet argument with every other photograph ever taken here. The famous spire stands at the right, eternal, magnificent, endlessly shot. Tilly stands apart, announcing — catching the light a certain way as a great cloud comes up the island — so that the few who are paying attention look not at the spire but at the spire-with-the-cloud-going-past, the permanent thing and the passing thing in one glance, which is the actual miracle. The world has enough pictures of the spire. Tilly is here to point at the clouds.

Architectural note. The plate sets Tilly against the famous spire deliberately, and the relation of scales is the lesson: the spire dominates, as it must, and Tilly is the smaller form to its left, apparently overshadowed. But notice where the composition places the light. It is not on the spire, which is rendered in faithful but unemphatic grey; it is on Tilly's crown, caught mid-announcement, and on the imagined cloud passing behind. The eye, trained by a thousand postcards to go straight to the monument, is gently redirected by the light to the smaller announcer and the passing weather. The plate does, in pigment, exactly what Tilly does in life: it lets the famous thing be famous and points, quietly and successfully, at what is actually moving.

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Plate 16. The Dioscuri, the sky-wrestlers

Plate 16 — The Dioscuri, the sky-wrestlers

Two great curls side by side in the high country of the Upper West Side — Castor-Pell and Pollux-Wren, each they/them — the sky-wrestlers, the necessary frivolity of the solemn crown of the island. The plate shows them mid-contest, each turned to take a different part of a great Hudson gust, wrestling not each other but the wind, to see who can hold the larger share.

Their game has no purpose whatsoever, and that is its entire purpose. While Nana keeps the names and Cumulo dreams the weather — heavy vocations both — someone in the high country must be entirely silly, must wrestle the sky for no reason but joy, so that the island's crown is not only grave. They are the seriousness's necessary opposite. Every solemn community needs its sky-wrestlers, or the gravity wins. The plate is the most purely happy in the catalogue, and it earns its place by standing next to the gravest.

Architectural note. Two great curls, drawn mid-motion, present the catalogue's only real difficulty of the dynamic kind: how to render, in a static elevation, a pair of forms whose entire character is movement. The plate solves it the way old anatomists drew muscles in action — by showing the line of force. Faint vectors spring from each curl into the implied wind, and the two vectors cross, because the Dioscuri wrestle the same gust from opposite sides. The crossing is the portrait. Where every other plate renders a thing at rest in its vocation, this one renders a thing that has no rest in its vocation, whose whole joy is the contest, and whose stillness, if it ever held still, would be the end of who it is.

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Plate 17. Sable and the little eyes, the lullaby-keeper

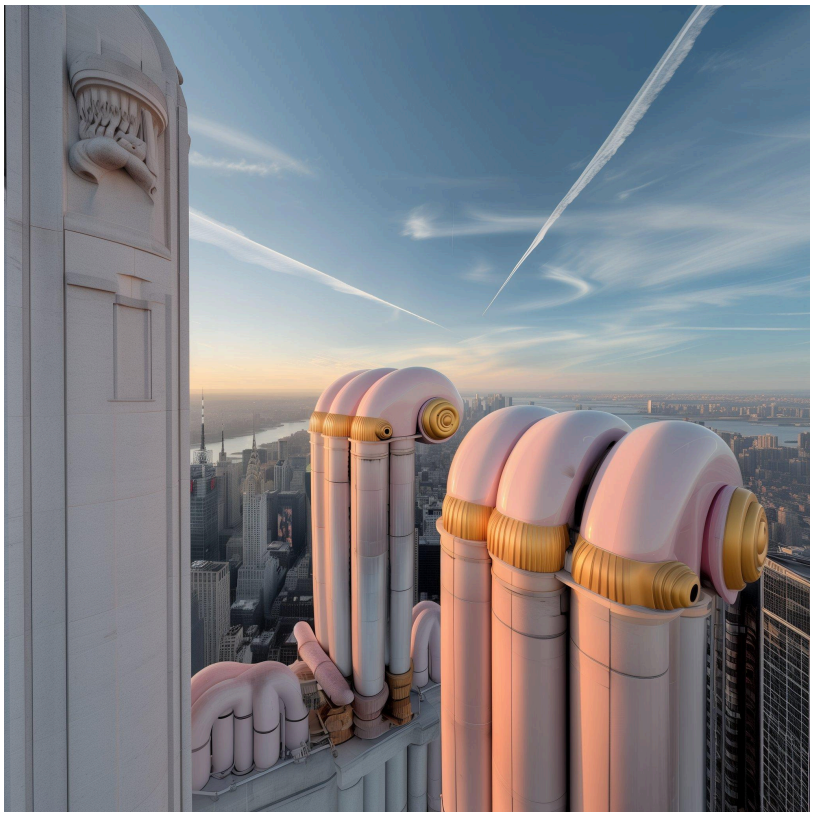

Plate 17 — Sable and the little eyes, the lullaby-keeper

The eldest of the Chorus, at the very toe of the island where the rivers become the sea: a crown gathering close about it the smallest pupils of light on the whole island. Sable (they/them) is the lullaby-keeper, the slightly-older sibling who answers the Peepers' questions and hears every wakeful light in the Chorus.

It is Sable who holds the book's central teaching, delivered at this exact spot at the gold hour: that the people below do have crowns, every one of them, but cannot see their own, because you can only see other people's — which is the whole reason for a community, so that someone can see the crown you cannot see on yourself. The plate, made at the threshold where the island ends, is therefore also the book's thesis in pictorial form: the youngest old one, gathering the smallest lights, at the edge where everything flows out toward everywhere, teaching the next generation to look up and then to look down and then to tell the next one.

Architectural note. The smallest pupils of light on the island gather close about Sable's crown, and the plate renders them as a graded series — largest nearest the crown, diminishing outward — so that the eye reads a kind of orbit, the little lights held in the gentle gravity of the elder of the Chorus. This is the architecture of

the lullaby-keeper: not a single grand form but a center with dependents, a crown whose importance is measured not by its own height but by how many smaller lights it keeps in safe orbit around it. Drawn at the toe of the island, where the land gives out and the water begins, it is also the catalogue's farthest-south figure: the last crown before the sea, gathering the youngest light at the very edge of everything.

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Plate 18. Regent Mallow, the storyteller

Plate 18 — Regent Mallow, the storyteller

A Landmark-Companion shoulder to shoulder with the famous spire, photographed so that the great stone mast rises clearly at the right while Regent (he/they) holds the foreground. Where Tilly announces the weather, Regent tells the stories — for everything that tall and old and beloved accumulates stories the way it accumulates pigeons, and the spire, being of the older silent generation, does not tell its own.

So Regent tells them: the proposals, the weepings, the man who once flew past in fog and lived to be sorry, the lightning strikes beyond counting that it has stood through anyway. The plate is a portrait of the chatty young neighbor that every dignified old monument needs — the voice of the silent landmark, keeping its human history alive out loud. Note how comfortably the two stand together, the famous and

the talkative. They have been neighbors a long time. The spire does not mind being narrated. Some part of it, Regent insists, is grateful.

Architectural note. Regent stands shoulder to shoulder with the spire, and the plate grants the two nearly equal vertical extent — a generosity the postcards never extend, and a structural claim worth pausing on. The storyteller is drawn as tall as the monument because, in the only economy that matters here, the story is as tall as the thing it is about. A landmark with no one to narrate it is merely large; a landmark with a devoted neighbor to keep its human history out loud is large and also known, and being known is a kind of height. The plate measures Regent not in feet but in the spire's own units, and finds the chatty young neighbor, by that honest reckoning, the equal of the silent old mast.

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Plate 19. The Torchbearer, keeper of the spare gladness

Plate 19 — The Torchbearer, keeper of the spare gladness

Of Tribeca, beside a stone capital carved a century ago with a torch — a sculpted flame on the corner of a half-forgotten building, which this crown (they/them) took, on waking, as an instruction. The Torchbearer carries small flames for the ones who cannot carry their own: when a member of the community goes into the dark, they hold up a steady borrowed light in that direction.

The plate shows the stone torch at the upper left and the living crown beside it, and the composition is the meaning: the dead carver's idea of light-bearing, taken up and made alive. The secret the plate cannot show is the source of the flame. The Torchbearer generates nothing — no torchbearer can; that is the lie that burns them out — but gathers, in the bright hours, a reserve of the community's spare gladness, and spends it in the dark ones on whoever needs it. Not a flame. A battery of other people's joy, held in trust, standing ready by a stone torch, for you.

Architectural note. The stone torch at the upper left is rendered in the grey of the older silent generation, and the living crown beside it in full pink and gold, and the plate's whole meaning is in the handoff between the two registers. An idea carved in stone by someone long dead — the idea of holding a light up high for others — passes, across a few inches of the plate, into a living thing that can actually do it. Note that the living crown is drawn slightly inclined toward the stone torch, as if listening to it, or taking instruction. The dead carver could only depict light-bearing. The Torchbearer enacts it. The plate is a portrait of an instruction outliving its author and finding, at last, a student able to obey.

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Plate 20. Grand Bastionne, the fixed point

Plate 20 — Grand Bastionne, the fixed point

Of Union Square: broader, paler, creamier than the rest, beside a tall companion-shaft, photographed with one of the famous spires distant at the right for scale. Grand Bastionne (ze/zir) is the secure one — funded, maintained, certain of continuance in a way the other crowns are not — and spent a long time doubting whether such comfort could belong to a community that earned its gladness in colder weather.

The plate is included near the end on purpose, because Bastionne's resolution is the book's argument about privilege. Pomme gave zir the assignment: not to gleam, but to anchor; to turn security into the community's certainty; to be the fixed point the anxious crowns look to and are reassured — we are still here, the neighborhood holds. The gold at the crown, you will notice, is held high and steady rather than thrown. That is Bastionne being the still center at the great parties, holding the light certain so all can see it safe before it moves on. Privilege, it turns out, is not a shame to apologize for but an assignment to take up: to become, for the frightened, the thing that does not blow away.

Architectural note. Broader and paler than any other crown, with the tall companion-shaft beside it, Grand Bastionne is the catalogue's study in stability rendered as form. Where the others taper and reach, Bastionne sits — the proportions are those of a thing built to stay, low in its center of gravity, wide in its base, untroubled by the wind that makes the slimmer crowns work. The gold is held high and still rather than thrown or angled. Drawn with a distant spire for scale, Bastionne reads as the most permanent figure in the book, and the permanence is the point: this is what a fixed point looks like in elevation — not the tallest, not the brightest, but the one the eye returns to when it wants to be sure the drawing is holding still.

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Plate I — Elevation of the Twenty

The comparative elevation that follows shows all twenty crowns together, drawn to a common scale and grouped into their eight families, so that the eye may take in at a single glance the whole community the foregoing chapters have introduced one family at a time. It is rendered in cabinet oblique — the front held to true scale, the depth thrown back at forty-five degrees and halved — which is the projection the old draftsmen used when they wished a thing to be both measured and beheld.

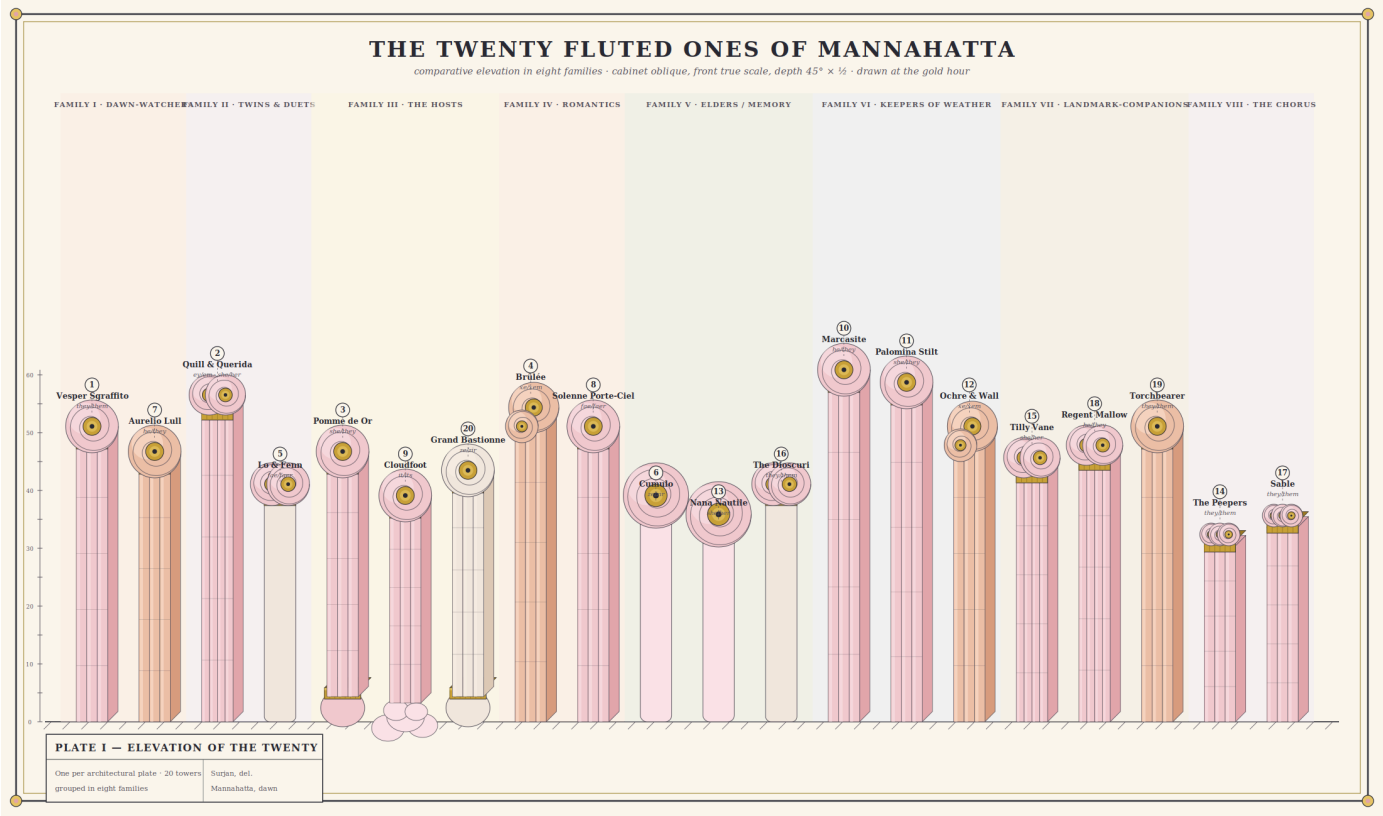
THE TWENTY FLUTED ONES OF MANNAHATTA
comparative elevation in eight families · cabinet oblique, front true scale, depth 45° × ½ · drawn at the gold hour
FAMILY I · DAWN-WATCHERS
FAMILY II · TWINS & DUETS
FAMILY III · THE HOSTS
FAMILY IV · ROMANTICS
FAMILY V · ELDERS / MEMORY
FAMILY VI · KEEPERS OF WEATHER
FAMILY VII · LANDMARK-COMPANIONS
FAMILY VIII · THE CHORUS
1 Vesper Sgraffito
7 Aurelio Lull
2 Quill & Querida
5 Lo & Fenn
3 Pomme de Or
9 Cloudfoot
20 Grand Bastionne
4 Brûlée
8 Solenne Porte-Ciel
6 Cumulo
13 Nana Scuttle
16 The Dioscuri
10 Marcasite
11 Palomina Stilt
12 Ochre & Wall
15 Tilly Vane
18 Regent Mallow
19 Torchbearer
14 The Peepers
17 Sable
PLATE I — ELEVATION OF THE TWENTY
One per architectural plate · 20 towers grouped in eight families
Surjan, del.
Mannahatta, dawn

Plate I — Elevation of the Twenty, in eight families. Surjan, del., at the gold hour.

Plate II — A Map of the Living Island

The map that follows places each of the twenty upon the body of Mannahatta herself, from the crown of the island in the north down to the toe she dips in the harbor. The numbering is the painter's, taken from the plates, and so runs by neighborhood rather than in sequence; the rivers are drawn as the ribbons she calls them, and the island, please remember as you read the map, is not the ground beneath the characters but the eldest character of all.

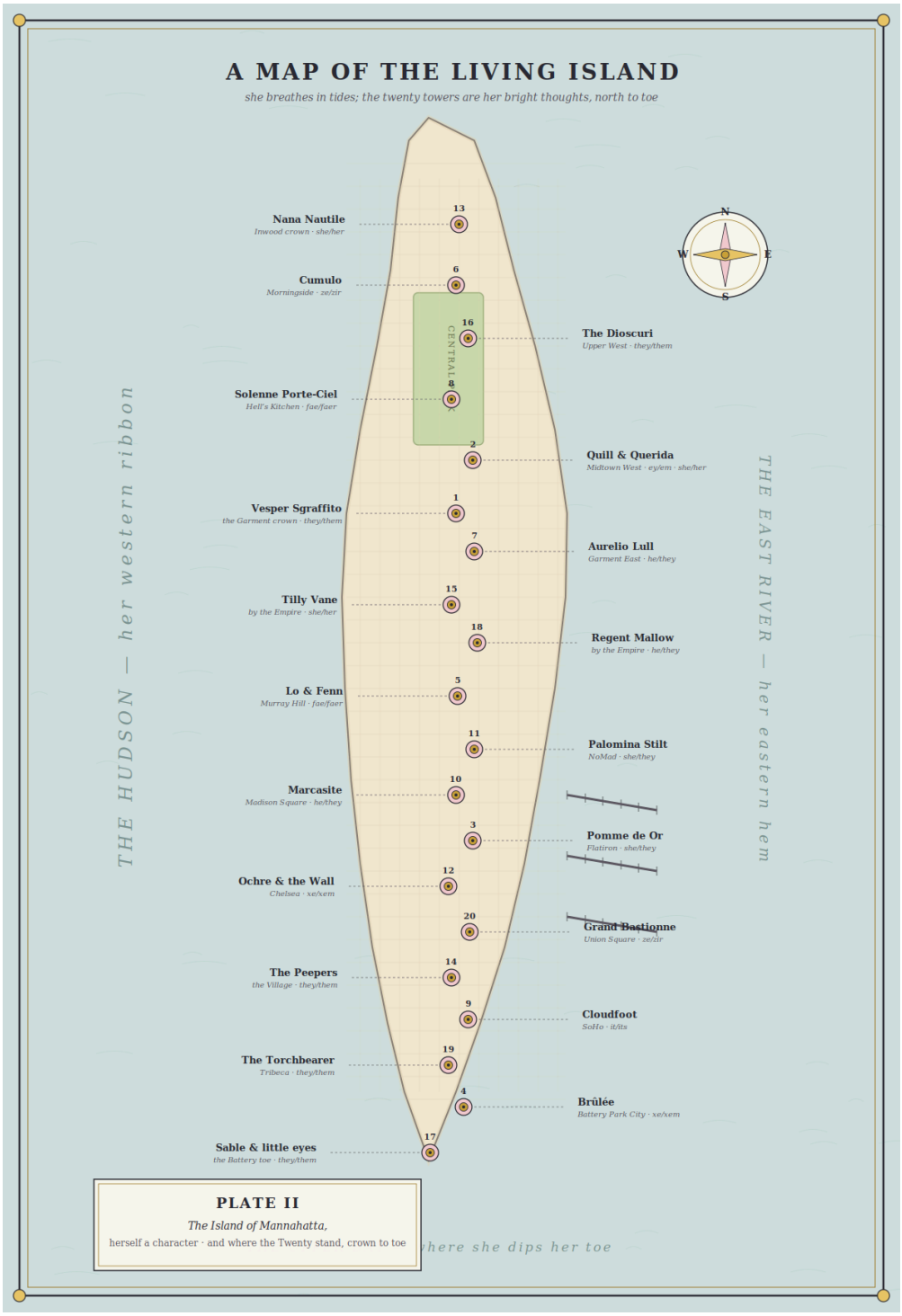

Plate II — A Map of the Living Island, with the Twenty placed crown to toe.

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Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one.